

Glossary and Terms

Advocacy

Advocacy is the support or defense of a cause and the act of pleading on behalf of another person.

Amendment

A proposal to change or a change to a piece of legislation.

Appropriations Bill

Provides the legal authority needed to spend or obligate U.S. Treasury funds. There are up to 12 annual appropriations bills, which together fund the entire federal government, and must all be enacted prior to the start of a new fiscal year. Failure to meet this deadline results in the need for a temporary short-term funding measure (continuing resolution) or there will be a shut-down of the government.

At-Large Representative

Representatives from states with a population qualifying for one or less than one House seat (e.g. Wyoming).

Authorization Bill

Provides the authority for a program or agency to exist and determines its policy. Can also recommend spending levels to carry out defined policy, but these levels are not binding. Authorizations may be annual, multi-year, or permanent. House and Senate rules require that authorization be in place before final funding decisions are made.

Beltway

An interstate highway that encircles Washington, D.C., and passes through Maryland and Virginia suburbs. "Inside the Beltway" refers to an issue of interest or relevance to Washington DC residents and workers.

Bill

A legislative proposal that becomes law if it passes both the House and Senate in identical fashion and receives Presidential approval. Bills are introduced in the House as "HR" and in the Senate as "S" with consecutive numbering in each respective chamber. Beside bills, joint resolutions are the only other type of legislation that can become law.

Budget Resolution

The annual decision made by Congress to set spending and revenue levels, providing a voluntary framework within which Congress agrees to limit subsequent funding bills. It may also instruct committees to change current law in order to save money.

Capitol Hill

The area encompassing the U.S. Capitol, and the House and Senate office buildings.

Casework

Intermediary work performed by Members of Congress for constituents who may have problems or "cases" with the federal government (e.g. Medicare, Social Security).

Caucus

An informal group of members sharing an interest in policy issues (e.g. the House Nursing Caucus).

Chairman

The presiding officer of a committee and/or subcommittee and member of the majority party in the chamber.

Cloture

The formal procedure used to end a filibuster. It can take up to 3 days and requires 60 votes. If cloture wins, 30 additional hours of debate are allowed prior to voting, but they are rarely used. If cloture fails, debate would continue without limits. Instead, the bill is usually set aside.

Colloquy

A pre-scripted floor dialogue between the chairman of a committee and another Member of Congress.

Committee of the Whole

The entire House meeting in the form of a committee.

Committee Report

A formal report prepared by a House or Senate committee to explain the content of a bill being reported. Committee reports are optional in the Senate, but mandatory in the House. They contain views of committee members, a cost impact analysis, and compare the bill to current law.

Companion Bill

A bill that is similar or identical to one introduced in the other chamber of Congress.

Concurrent Resolution

Used to take action or express opinion on behalf of both the House and Senate, it does not make or become law. It fixes Congressional adjournment dates and sets the annual Congressional budget.

Conferee

A Member of Congress named to represent his/her chamber in negotiations with the other house. Formally known as "managers" the conferees meet in conference committee to negotiate a compromise between the House and Senate versions of a bill.

Conference

A formal meeting, or series of meetings, between House and Senate Members to reconcile differences between House and Senate passed measures. A conference is held by a conference committee consisting of both Democrats and Republicans (referred to as "conferees" or "managers") who sit on the committees with jurisdiction over the legislation that needs to be reconciled into a single uniform measure.

Conference Committee

A temporary panel of House and Senate negotiators. A conference committee is created to resolve differences between versions of similar House and Senate bills.

Conference Report

The final compromise version of a bill proposed by House and Senate conferees. It also contains the "statement of managers," a section-by-section explanation of the final agreement.

Congressional Budget Office (CBO)

The agency that, at the request of Congress, conducts non-partisan economic analysis and research and evaluates proposed bills and amendments, assessing their potential cost.

Congressional District

A geographical area within a state from which a member of House of Representatives is elected and which he or she represents in Congress. There are 435 Congressional districts; each with about 600,000 people.

Congressional Record

A daily account of House and Senate floor debate, votes, and members' remarks. Available online at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord>

Congressional Research Service

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) of the Library of Congress responds to requests for general information and issue analysis only from Members, committees, or staff.

Consideration

The process by which the Senate or House explores the legislation including debate, amendment, and voting.

Cosponsor

A member who formally adds his/her name as a supporter to another member's bill. An "original" or "initial" cosponsor is one who was listed at the time of the bill's introduction, not added on later.

Constituent Service

The assistance given constituents by Members of Congress in non-legislative areas. Most requests are for help in obtaining action from federal agencies on individual problems and cases (e.g. Medicare, Social Security). Other services include arranging government agency tours, commendation letters, flags flown over the Capitol, and military academy appointments.

Constituents

The people who live in the Member's Congressional district or state.

Continuing Resolution

A short-term or long-term funding bill that funds the federal government after September 30 until a permanent appropriations measure is passed.

Dear Colleague

A letter sent by one or more members to all fellow members. "Dear Colleague" letters can describe a new bill and ask for cosponsors, May ask for a member's vote for or against a particular issue, or request fellow Members' support for another priority, such as increased funding for a kidney research program. Appropriations "Dear Colleague" letters usually request members to show support by signing on to a joint letter to Appropriations Committee leaders asking for a particular funding amount for a specific program of interest.

Delegate

A member of the House from Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands or Washington D.C. The Constitution prohibits delegates from voting on the House floor, but permits them to vote in committee.

Demonstration Project

A project funded by the federal government to test new technology or policies.

Discharge Petition

A petition that starts a process to force a bill out of committee. A successful petition requires the signatures of 218 members, a majority of the House.

Discretionary Spending

Spending set by the annual appropriation levels and decided by Congress. This spending is optional, in contrast to entitlement programs (e.g. Medicare and Medicaid), for which funding is mandatory. Funding for the NIH and CDC is considered discretionary spending and annual funding is determined in each appropriations cycle.

District Work Period

The time set aside for Members to work at-home away from Washington, D.C. when House is not in session.

Earmarks

Specific provisions detailing – or setting aside – funding for a specific program or purpose. Expenditures are earmarked in appropriations bills or the accompanying reports.

Entitlement Spending

Funds for programs like Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and Veteran's benefits. Funding levels are automatically set by the number of eligible recipients, not at the discretion of Congress.

Executive Order

A Presidential directive with the force of law that does not need Congressional approval.

Filibuster

An extended debate in the Senate which has the effect of preventing a vote. Senate rules contain no motion to force a vote. A vote occurs only when debate ends.

Fiscal Year

The federal government's budget year begins on October 1st and ends on September 30th. For example, FY 2009 began on October 1st 2008 and will end on September 30, 2009.

Free-Standing Bill

A coherent bill that deals with a single issue.

GAO

Government Accountability Office, which audits federal agencies and programs for Congress.

Germane

The technical term for "relevant." Amendments are said to be germane or germane to a bill.

GOP

Stands for "Grand Old Party," term used to refer to the Republican party.

GPO

Government Printing Office, which prints laws, bills, committee reports, etc. The GPO sells these documents to the public and distributes an allotted number free to members.

Hearing

A formal meeting of a committee or subcommittee to review legislation or explore a topic. Hearings may also be called to investigate a matter or conduct oversight of existing programs. Witnesses are called to deliver testimony and answer questions in all 3 types of hearings.

Joint Resolution

Measures used to appropriate funding, pose constitutional amendments, or fix technical errors. Joint resolutions become public law if adopted by both the House and Senate, and, where relevant, approved by the President. In terms of Constitutional amendments, they must be approved by three-fourths of the states.

Lame Ducks

Members who will not return in the next Congress but who are finishing out their current term.

Lame Duck Session

The period of time, but before Congress adjourns, that Congress meets after an election, in which Members of Congress who have not been re-elected still cast votes.

Lay on the Table

To lay a bill, resolution, amendment, appeal, or motion on the table is to dispose of it permanently and adversely. Under Congressional rules of procedure, tabling kills the underlying matter.

Legislative Day

Any day on which the House or Senate meets. It runs until the next recess or adjournment.

Majority Leader

The Majority Leader is elected by his/her party members in the House or Senate to lead them, to promote passage of the party's issue priorities, and to coordinate legislative efforts with the Minority Leader, the other chamber, and the White House.

Manager's Amendment

A package of numerous individual amendments agreed to by both sides in advance.

Mandatory Spending

Such required funding that accounts for two-thirds of the federal budget. These funds are not controlled by annual decision of Congress but are automatically obliged by virtue of previously-enacted laws. For example, as Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, and social security are entitlement programs, funding for them all falls under mandatory spending.

Mark-Up

A meeting of a committee to review the text of a bill before reporting it out to the full chamber for consideration. Committee members offer and vote on proposed changes (amendments) to the bill's language. Most mark-ups end with a vote to send the revised version of the bill forward to the floor (full Chamber) for final consideration and approval.

Minority Leader

The Minority Leader is elected by his/her party members in the House or Senate to lead them, to promote passage of the party's issue priorities, and to coordinate legislative efforts with the Majority leader, the other chamber, and the White House.

Motion to Instruct Conferees

A motion to instruct conferees, if adopted, asks House or Senate conferees to take certain negotiating positions.

Motion to Proceed

A motion to proceed seeks to bring a bill to the Senate floor for debate and amendment.

Motion to Recommit

A motion to recommit returns a bill to committee, in effect killing it. However, a motion to recommit with instructions is a last opportunity to amend the bill.

Motion to Reconsider

A motion to reconsider, if adopted within 2 days of a vote in the House, or 3 days in the Senate, requires the original vote to be held again.

Motion to Strike

A type of amendment that seeks to delete language from a bill.

Motion to Table

A motion to table, if adopted, permanently kills the pending matter. It also ends further debate.

Motion to Waive the Budget Act

If adopted, this motion temporarily sets aside a specific provision of the Congressional Budget Act. Without a waiver, the provision would cause the pending amendment to fall on a point of order (defined below). With a waiver, the amendment may be considered even though it violates the Congressional Budget Act. A minimum of 60 votes are required for Congress.

Off-Budget

Describes programs not counted toward budget limits due to provisions in current law. For example, Social Security trust funds and the United States Postal Service are off-budget programs.

OMB

The Office of Management and Budget is the federal agency that prepares the President's budget submission to Congress and develops associated economic forecasts.

Omnibus Bill

A large measure that packages together several bills into one or combines diverse subjects into a single bill. Examples are reconciliation bills and combined appropriations bills.

Override

The vote taken to pass a bill again, after it has been vetoed by the President. It takes a two-thirds vote in each chamber, or 290 in the House and 67 in the Senate, if all are present and voting. If the veto is overridden in both chambers, the bill becomes law despite the objection of the President.

Outlays

The actual payments made out of the federal treasury to fulfill obligations incurred earlier.

Oversight

A Congressional review of federal agencies, government programs, and performance.

Paygo

The pay-as-you-go rule compels new spending or tax changes to not add to the federal deficit.

Pocket Veto

A veto when the President fails to sign a bill within the 10 days allowed by the Constitution. Congress must be in adjournment in order for a pocket veto to take effect.

Point of Order

A point of order is made during floor proceedings to assert that the rules of procedure are being violated. A point of order halts proceedings while the presiding officer rules on whether or not it is valid. In the Senate, the chair's ruling may be appealed by any Senator. The Senate votes on the appeal and the chair has been frequently overturned. In the House tradition, appeals are also possible, but rarely entered and almost never succeed.

Pork Barrel Legislation

When used to describe a bill, implies the legislation is loaded with special projects (earmarks) for Members of Congress to distribute to their constituents back home. The term intones that the project funding is an act of largesse, courtesy of the federal taxpayer.

Power of the Purse

Refers to constitutional power given Congress to raise and spend money.

President's Budget

The document sent to Congress each year by the Administration, usually the first week of February. It estimates the receipts and spending, and recommends appropriation levels and administrative priorities for the upcoming fiscal year.

Pro Forma Session

A daily meeting of the House or Senate during which no votes are held and no legislative business is conducted.

Question of Final Passage

Occurs when the chair puts the question to the chamber for a final vote in favor or opposition to the measure under consideration.

Quorum

The number of House Members (218) or Senators (51) who must be present before business can be conducted.

Quorum Call – House

A quorum call in the House seeks to bring a majority of members to the floor to record their presence.

Quorum Call – Senate

A quorum call in the Senate may have more than one purpose. It is most often used to delay proceedings.

Ranking Member

The member of the minority party on a committee and/or subcommittee next in seniority after the chairman (highest ranking member of the minority party).

Recess

A temporary break in the session for a short period of time within the same day. Recess also refers to longer breaks over several days, such as holiday periods, which are approved by vote. Senators and Representatives usually travel home during recess to conduct business with local constituents.

Recorded Vote

A recorded vote is a specific type of vote held on the record. It links the name of each Member with his/her voting position.

Reconciliation Bill

Makes the changes in law required to meet pre-set spending and revenue levels. The bill comes forward when a prior budget resolution passed by the House and Senate calls for it. The budget committee packages the bills produced by all the other committees into one omnibus bill.

Refer

To send a bill just introduced to the appropriate committee for initial examination.

Regular Order

Regular order refers to the regular rules of procedure in the chamber. In the Senate, the term may also refer to the daily order of business.

Report

A written document by a Committee to accompany the legislation that they have voted out.

Reporting Out

The vote of a committee to send a bill to the full House or Senate for review.

Rider

An amendment attached to a bill, usually unrelated to the subject of the underlying bill.

Roll Call Vote

A vote held on the record. The name of the Member and his/her voting position are noted together.

Second Degree

An amendment offered to change the text of another amendment; in other words, an amendment to an amendment.

Secretary of the Senate

Non-partisan employee who serves as the Chief Administrative Officer.

Sense of the House

Legislative language which offers the opinion of the House, but does not make law.

Sense of the Senate

Legislative language which offers the opinion of the Senate but does not make law.

Sine Die Adjournment

The end of a Congressional session or an entire Congress.

Special Interest

Any group of people organized around a specific shared interest, such as neonatal nurses, senior citizens, etc.

Sponsor

Member or Members who propose and support legislation.

Senior Senator/Junior Senator

Describes the seniority relationship between two senators from the same state, with the senior senator serving in the Senate longer than the junior Senator.

Standing Committee

A committee of the House or Senate with permanent status, whereas a select committee is temporary.

State of the Union

The president's State of the Union address defines his or her view of national priorities and needed legislation. The Constitution requires that the president report to Congress on the State of the Union "from time to time."

Suspension of the Rules

A special procedure used in the House to speed up action by setting aside the regular rules. Bills brought up under this process are debated for 40 minutes, may not be amended, and require a two-thirds vote for approval.

Tie Vote

The question loses. In the Senate, a tie may be broken by the President.

Time Agreement

A voluntary pact among Senators to limit debate time on a bill or amendment.

Unanimous Consent

All members on the floor agree, or consent, to a pending request.

Unfunded Mandate

A requirement imposed by Congress on state or local governments without the provision of associated funding to pay for it.

Up or Down Vote

A direct vote on the substance of an amendment or bill, sometimes referred to as a "clean vote" or "straight up or down." Members simply vote "yea" or "nay" on it.

Veto Proof

A vote with sufficient margin to override a Presidential veto, should it occur. Since a two-thirds vote is required to override, a veto-proof majority is 290 votes in the House and 67 votes in the Senate.

Voice Vote

During a voice vote members say "aye" aloud as a group followed by the group saying "nay." No names are recorded.

Whip

A member elected by his or her party to count potential votes and promote party unity in voting. The House Majority Whip is the 3rd ranking leadership position in his or her party, and the House Minority Whip ranks second in the party. The Senate Majority and Minority Whip are the 2nd ranking leadership Positions in their parties.

Yeas & Nays – House

A specific type of recorded vote that requires a seconding of the Motion of one-fifth of those present. The vote, if ordered, places members' positions on record. Usually taken by electronic device.

Yeas & Nays – Senate

The term for a roll-call vote. Members call out "yea" or "nay" when their name is called, or signal the clerk with a thumb up or thumb down.