

what congress does and why it matters

answer key

What Congress Does and Why It Matters

Congress is a crucial component of the United States government, playing an essential role in shaping the country's laws, policies, and direction. Understanding what Congress does and why it matters is vital for citizens, as it directly impacts their lives and the nation as a whole. This article aims to break down the functions of Congress, its structure, and the significance of its actions.

Structure of Congress

The United States Congress is a bicameral legislature, meaning it consists of two separate chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate. Each chamber has distinct roles, responsibilities, and procedures.

House of Representatives

- **Composition:** The House is made up of 435 members, with the number from each state determined by its population. Representatives serve two-year terms.
- **Responsibilities:** The House has the exclusive authority to introduce revenue bills and is responsible for impeaching federal officials. Its members are often seen as closer to the electorate due to their shorter terms.

Senate

- **Composition:** The Senate consists of 100 members, with two Senators from each state, regardless of population. Senators serve six-year terms.
- **Responsibilities:** The Senate has the power to confirm presidential appointments, ratify treaties, and conduct impeachment trials. This chamber is often viewed as a stabilizing force, given its longer terms and smaller size.

Primary Functions of Congress

Congress performs several key functions that are pivotal to the governance of the United States.

Legislation

One of the primary functions of Congress is to create laws. This involves several steps:

1. **Drafting a Bill:** Any member of Congress can propose legislation, which is then drafted into a formal bill.
2. **Committee Review:** The bill is assigned to a relevant committee, which examines its implications, holds hearings, and can make amendments.
3. **Floor Debate:** After committee approval, the bill is brought to the floor of the House or Senate for debate and further amendments.
4. **Voting:** Members vote on the bill. If it passes in one chamber, it goes to the other for a similar process.
5. **Presidential Approval:** If both chambers approve the bill, it is sent to the President, who can sign it into law or veto it.

Representation

Members of Congress represent the interests and views of their constituents. This representation can take various forms:

- **Direct Advocacy:** Congress members advocate for policies that benefit their districts or states.
- **Constituent Services:** They assist constituents in navigating government services and addressing issues with federal agencies.
- **Public Accountability:** Congress holds public hearings and listens to the concerns of the electorate, ensuring transparency and accountability in government.

Oversight

Congress has the responsibility to oversee the executive branch and ensure that laws are implemented effectively. This oversight includes:

- **Investigations:** Congress conducts investigations into matters of public concern, including potential misconduct by executive officials.
- **Appropriations:** Congress controls federal spending and can influence executive actions by granting or denying funding.

Advice and Consent

The Senate has the constitutional responsibility to provide advice and consent on presidential appointments and treaties. This function includes:

- **Confirming Appointments:** The Senate confirms federal judges, cabinet

members, and ambassadors, ensuring that these positions are filled by qualified individuals.

- Ratifying Treaties: The Senate must approve international treaties negotiated by the President, requiring a two-thirds majority for ratification.

Why Congress Matters

The actions and decisions made by Congress have far-reaching implications for American society. Here are several reasons why Congress matters:

Democratic Representation

Congress is a fundamental institution in the U.S. democracy, representing the will of the people. Through their elected representatives, citizens have a voice in the legislative process, influencing laws that govern their everyday lives.

Checks and Balances

The structure of Congress is vital for maintaining a system of checks and balances within the government. By overseeing the executive branch and ensuring accountability, Congress prevents the concentration of power and protects individual liberties. This balance is crucial for preserving democracy and preventing abuses of power.

Policy Making

Congress shapes national policy on various critical issues, including healthcare, education, and foreign relations. The laws passed by Congress affect the economy, civil rights, and the environment, thus influencing the quality of life for all Americans.

Public Engagement

Congress acts as a platform for public engagement and discourse. Through public hearings and committee meetings, citizens have the opportunity to express their views and concerns about proposed legislation. This interaction fosters a sense of community and encourages civic participation.

Challenges Faced by Congress

Despite its importance, Congress faces several challenges that can hinder its effectiveness:

Partisanship

The increasing polarization between political parties often leads to gridlock, making it difficult for Congress to pass legislation. Partisan conflicts can result in stalled bills and an inability to address pressing national issues.

Influence of Money in Politics

Campaign financing and lobbying can distort the legislative process. Special interest groups may exert undue influence on lawmakers, prioritizing their interests over those of the general public.

Public Disillusionment

Many Americans feel disconnected from Congress, leading to low voter turnout and increased cynicism about government. This disillusionment can undermine the legitimacy of the institution and decrease civic engagement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Congress plays a vital role in the governance of the United States. Through its legislative, oversight, and representation functions, Congress shapes the laws and policies that affect every American. Understanding what Congress does and why it matters is essential for informed citizenship. As the nation faces complex challenges, an engaged and active Congress remains crucial for addressing the needs and aspirations of the American people. By participating in the democratic process, citizens can help ensure that Congress fulfills its responsibilities effectively and equitably.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary function of Congress?

The primary function of Congress is to create and pass federal laws that govern the country.

How does Congress influence the federal budget?

Congress holds the power of the purse, meaning it is responsible for approving the federal budget and funding government programs through appropriations.

Why is the process of checks and balances important in Congress?

Checks and balances prevent any one branch of government from becoming too powerful, ensuring that Congress can oversee and limit the actions of the executive branch.

What role does Congress play in representing constituents?

Members of Congress represent the interests and concerns of their constituents, advocating for their needs and preferences in the legislative process.

How does Congress contribute to the law-making process?

Congress introduces, debates, amends, and votes on proposed legislation, which must be approved by both the House of Representatives and the Senate before becoming law.

What impact does Congress have on social issues?

Congress addresses and shapes social issues through legislation that can promote social change, protect rights, and allocate resources for various programs.

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