

Main Idea

The voters elect members of Congress to represent them and to enact laws in their name. Congress plays a vital role in our government's system of checks and balances.

Reading Focus

1. How does Congress represent the people?
2. Why is the structure of Congress important?
3. What is the role of Congress in the system of checks and balances?

Key Terms

constituents
 apportionment
 appropriation
 impeachment
 oversight

Congress and the People (p. 123)

In the United States the people are sovereign, but they do not take part in national government directly. They elect representatives to make and carry out laws. Article I of the Constitution gives the lawmaking power to Congress.

Representing the People Each member of Congress represents the people of a particular geographic area. The people who live within that area are called the member's **constituents**. One way in which a member of Congress represents the people is by representing his or her constituents.

Members of Congress must deal with the demands of organized groups of like-minded people who join together to influence government and its policies. These groups are called interest groups. Members of Congress must also keep in mind the needs of the country as a whole. They try to balance their constituents' special interests with a desire to promote the common good—the outcome that is best for all.

Members of Congress Members of Congress tend to have more in common with one another than with the constituents they

represent. They tend to be older than the average age of the population. They are also much wealthier than the general population. Most members are white men. In recent years, however, Congress has become more diverse.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea Which groups do members of Congress represent?

The Structure of Congress (pp. 123–124)

Congress is a bicameral, or two-house, legislature. Its two houses are the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The House of Representatives The Constitution states that seats in the House “shall be apportioned among the several States ... according to their respective Numbers.” **Apportionment** means the distribution of House seats among the states based on population. Each House seat is meant to represent the same number of people. Today the total number of House seats is 435. There are also nonvoting delegates from the District of Columbia, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and

American Samoa. House members serve two-year terms. Elections for all seats are held at the same time.

The Senate The Constitution fixes membership in the Senate at “two Senators from each state.” As a result, the Senate today has 100 members. Before the Seventeenth Amendment was passed in 1913, senators were chosen by state legislatures. Today, voters elect senators, who serve six-year terms. The terms are staggered so that every two years, one-third of the Senate seats are up for election.

The Two-House Structure The bicameral structure of Congress resulted from the Great Compromise at the Constitutional Convention. The Great Compromise combined ideas from the Virginia Plan and the New Jersey Plan. The Virginia Plan called for a bicameral legislature with representation based on state population. The New Jersey Plan proposed a one-house legislature in which all states would be represented equally. The Great Compromise also settled a debate over how much say to give to voters. Because House members would be elected more frequently, they would directly represent the current will of the people. The Senate, with longer terms, would be less subject to frequent changes in public opinion.

Reading Check Summarizing What are the key features and purposes of the bicameral structure?

Congress and Checks and Balances (pp. 125–126)

United States governmental power is divided and separated into three different branches. As the legislative branch, Congress has strong checks on the powers of the executive and judicial branches.

The Power of the Purse Congress alone has the power to approve spending by the

federal government. It exercises this power through a special type of act called an **appropriation**, or a bill that sets aside funds for a specific purpose. This power is sometimes referred to as the “power of the purse.” Though the president can make funding requests, Congress can refuse to fund those requests. The Framers placed some limits on this power. Congress cannot, for example, lower the pay of the president and judges during their time in office.

The Power of Advice and Consent

The Constitution gives the president the job of making treaties with foreign governments and appointing key government officials. These presidential powers, however, are subject to the “advice and consent” of the Senate. A treaty must be approved by a two-thirds vote in the Senate to become law. The Senate can also reject presidential appointees, or people the president has chosen to fill top government jobs.

The Impeachment Power Congress has the power to charge officials in the executive and judicial branches with wrongdoing and bring them to trial. This is known as the power of **impeachment**. If found guilty, impeached officials can be removed from office before completing their terms. The process begins in the House of Representatives, which draws up the charges against the individual and then votes for impeachment. The Senate then holds a trial. A two-thirds vote of the Senate is required to find the official guilty and remove him or her from office.

Other Checks and Balances Congress can start the process of amending the Constitution. The ability to help change the Constitution can serve as a check on the power of courts to declare acts of Congress unconstitutional.

Congress can also check the power of the executive branch by voting to override a

presidential veto of a bill previously passed by Congress. This requires a two-thirds vote of each chamber of Congress.

The **oversight** power gives Congress broad powers to review how the executive branch is operating and to make sure it is following the laws. Congress has used its

oversight power to bring great political pressure on the executive branch.

Reading Check Identifying Supporting Details What are some examples of checks and balances Congress has over the executive branch?

SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT

1. **Recall** What is the term for the people represented by a member of Congress?
2. **Describe** What are some of the key differences between the House of Representatives and the Senate?
3. **Describe** What is **impeachment**?