

Main Idea

Senators represent entire states, have longer terms, and follow different rules of debate. These features help give the Senate its reputation as a more weighty and careful body than the House.

Reading Focus

1. What are the major features of the Senate and its membership?
2. What are the Senate's leadership posts?
3. What is the role of committees in the Senate?
4. What are some of the distinctive rules and traditions of the Senate?

Key Terms

president of the Senate
 president pro tempore
 Senate majority leader
 seniority rule
 filibuster
 cloture

The Senate and Its Membership

(pp. 144–145)

The Senate is often called the upper house because of its greater prestige, or reputation, and the power that individual senators have compared to their House colleagues. The Constitution also gives the Senate a few special powers, such as the power to reject presidential appointments.

Formal Qualifications The Framers believed the Senate needed to be filled with experienced, knowledgeable politicians. Senators must be at least 30 years old (compared with 25 in the House); a U.S. citizen for 9 years (7 in the House); and a resident of the state he or she represents. Senators also hold a longer term of office. Elections are staggered so that only a third of the Senate is up for re-election at once.

Election of Senators The Framers originally gave the election of senators to the state legislatures. In 1913, after numerous problems with this system, the Seventeenth Amendment was added to the

Constitution, which made direct popular election of senators part of the Constitution.

Informal Qualifications Senators are typically older than House members. They are also typically wealthier than House members and the general population. The Senate is also not as diverse as the House.

Reading Check Contrasting How do requirements for a Senate seat differ from those of a member of the House?

Senate Leadership (p. 145)

Like the House, the Senate has a leadership structure that helps the chamber do its work. Senate leadership is less powerful, however.

Constitutional Positions Article I, Section 3, Clause 4, of the Constitution assigns the job of **president of the Senate** to the vice president of the United States. He or she may watch over the debate, allow speakers to address the House, and make sure rules of debate are followed. He or she may not participate in debate or vote, except to break a tie.

The Constitution also directs the Senate to choose a **president pro tempore**—the person who presides, or watches over, in the absence of the president of the Senate. By tradition, this position goes to the senator from the majority party who has the longest record of service in the Senate. The president pro tempore is third in line, behind the Speaker of the House, to succeed the president.

Party Leaders In the Senate, the most powerful position belongs to the **Senate majority leader**. The majority leader is chosen by a vote of the majority party. This vote takes place at a party caucus at the start of each term. He or she is the spokesperson for the majority party and works to carry out the goals of his or her party. The Senate also has a minority leader. Both parties also have whips who help the leaders determine how senators are planning to vote.

Reading Check Identifying

Supporting Details What is the role of the president of the Senate?

Committees in the Senate (p. 146)

Like the House, the Senate performs much of its work in committees. These committees study policy areas in depth and hire many staff members who bring additional skills and knowledge to the lawmaking process.

Types of Senate Committees The Senate has 16 standing committees and many subcommittees. It also has select and special committees. They generally exist to examine a particular issue, advise the Senate, and provide oversight of government agencies. They may or may not be permanent. Senators also participate in joint and conference committees.

Membership in Committees In general, senators serve on no more than three committees and five subcommittees. They

try to serve on committees that represent their interests or those of their state.

Assignments are made at the party caucus or conference at the start of the term. They are partially based on how long the senator has served in office. The number of seats a party receives on a committee is based on how many seats the party holds in the Senate.

Committee Chairs Chairs hold a great deal of power—they set the committee schedule and call hearings. Chairs are always a member of the majority party. Traditionally, the chair of a committee has gone to the most senior majority senator on a committee, following the so-called **seniority rule**. In years past, committees have also voted on the chair position. There is a six-year term limit for chair positions.

Senate Committee Power The Senate alone approves presidential nominees, who are first considered by the appropriate committee. The Senate also approves treaties. A two-thirds majority vote is required for a treaty to become law. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee holds a great deal of influence on this process.

Reading Check Identifying

Supporting Details What is seniority rule?

Rules and Traditions (p. 147)

The Senate has many special rules and traditions. It is these rules and traditions that make it different from the House.

The Filibuster The Senate places few limits on debate. This rule allowed for the development of a practice called the **filibuster**. A filibuster occurs when opponents of a measure take the floor of the Senate and refuse to stop talking in an effort to prevent the measure coming up for a vote.

In 1917 the Senate moved to place some limit on the filibuster. It adopted a rule by

which a two-thirds vote would impose **cloture**—an end to debate. In 1975 the cloture rule was revised to require 60 votes.

Discipline in the Senate Like the House, the Senate can expel a member, which requires a two-thirds majority vote. The Senate has on nine occasions voted to censure, or officially denounce, a senator.

Filling Vacancies When a Senate seat becomes vacant due to the retirement or

death of a senator, the Seventeenth Amendment calls for the governor of the senator's state to name a replacement, provided the state legislature has given the governor the power to do so. That person serves until a special election can be held to fill the seat.

Reading Check Summarizing What types of committees are found in the House?

SECTION 4 ASSESSMENT

1. **Recall** What are the constitutional requirements to become a member of the Senate?
2. **Identify** What are the roles of the president of the **Senate**, the **president pro tempore**, and the **Senate majority leader**?
3. **Recall** How many standing committees exist in the Senate?
4. **Define** What is the meaning of the terms **filibuster** and **cloture**?