

## **Congress Module**

### **1. Introduction to Congress**

Please read Chapter 11 of our online textbook (<http://openstax.org/details/books/american-government-2e/>).

Make sure you are familiar with the following key terms:

The Constitution and Congress

Bicameralism

Redistricting and Apportionment

Gerrymandering and Racial Gerrymandering

Incumbency advantage

Trustee, delegate, and politico models of representation

Pork Barrel Spending

(please watch this awesome example of claiming credit for pork barrel spending starting at 0:21

[www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=ocWuPkNLla4&feature=emb\\_logo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=ocWuPkNLla4&feature=emb_logo))

Party leaders in Congress

Role of parties in Congress

Committee system

Committee markup

Cloture and the filibuster in the Senate (all important legislation is at risk of being filibustered and usually needs 60 votes to pass)

Conference committees

Presidential veto and veto override

How much support needed to pass/defeat legislation

Differences between the House and the Senate

## 2. How a Bill Becomes a Law

The textbook chapter gives you the basics, but I would like you to watch the classic Schoolhouse Rock! video, “I’m Just a Bill” as an entertaining reminder of how a bill is supposed to become a law (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFroMQlKiag>).

As the textbook points out, the reality is much more complicated. Only 3% of 13,556 bills introduced in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (2017-2019) became laws. The rest die terrible deaths. Most (around 90%) were never considered by committees and died in committee. Party leaders working with the House Rules Committee have a lot of power to decide which bills are allowed consideration. They also decide whether bills can receive amendments or whether the committee version is protected from any changes on the House floor.

This is such an important process, that I would like you to read a chapter on the House Rules Committee.

Please read “The Erosion of “Regular Order” in the U.S. House: A Historical Examination of Special Rules” by Michael S. Lynch, Anthony J. Madonna, and Allison S. Vick. This is such a new book chapter that the book isn’t even in print yet (this is from the book I have been complaining about working on throughout the semester). It was emailed to you.

After reading the chapter, please be able to explain the following:

What does the House Rules Committee do?

What are open and closed rules?

What are structured rules?

Why would parties want to restrict who makes amendments?

What is regular order? Would everything be awesome if we just used regular order?

For a broad overview of what it takes to successfully pass a bill, please read “Beating the Odds: Why One Bill Made It Through a Gridlocked Congress – and So Many Don’t” by Andrew Prokop ([www.vox.com/2014/5/22/5723878/how-a-bill-becomes-a-law-in-2014](http://www.vox.com/2014/5/22/5723878/how-a-bill-becomes-a-law-in-2014)).

After reading this article, please be able to explain the following:

What are the many ways that a bill can die?

How can these be overcome?

### Final thought

Passing legislation is a numbers game. At a minimum, you need at least 218 votes (1/2) in the House, 60 votes (3/5 to invoke cloture) in the Senate, and the support of the president to pass a bill. If the president does support a bill, you need 2/3 of the House and 2/3 of the Senate. It is difficult to pass legislation in the United States.

We tend to see important bills pass when one party controls everything (see Obamacare) or when there is an emergency that everyone realizes we must confront (see Declaration of War against Japan after Pearl Harbor or the current \$1 trillion COVID-19 bill on which Congress is currently working).

### **Short Assignment**

Attached is a list of bills that have become law in the current 116<sup>th</sup> Congress (<https://www.congress.gov/public-laws/116th-congress>). Pick one of these bills that sounds interesting to you. Click on the bill number and a new page about the bill will open up. First, using the “Summary” tab, quickly tell me what your bill is about. Second, using the “Actions” tab, tell me how your bill became a law (click on the all action button after getting to the “Actions” tab). Was it more like the textbook bill-becomes-a-law process the singing bill told you about, or did the bill take a more unusual path. Use the information from the readings to assess how difficult a time your bill had becoming a law.

Please write this up in around a half page and email it to me. The due date for this assignment is April 6. You may turn it in earlier if you would like.

Let me know if you have any questions about the assignment. I really like this stuff and will be happy to help.

## **Final Study Guide**

How does a bill become a law? What hurdles must be overcome?

What is the Rules Committee's job in the House? How does this influence bill passage?

What is a filibuster? How do you stop one?

House and Senate differences

Role of parties in Congress

Redistricting and gerrymandering