

“Civics 101” includes basic information about the U.S. Congress, information on federal legislation, and basic concepts of how Congress works. While this fact sheet will be useful to you as you work on NACNS legislative priorities at the federal level, most of the information contained in this fact sheet will also be transferrable to any legislative initiatives you may be working on in your respective states.

THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

How many chambers comprise the U.S. Congress?

The U.S. Congress consists of two bodies, called chambers or houses — the Senate and the House of Representatives.

How many members of the Senate and House are there in Congress?

There are 100 Senate members, two from each of the 50 states. There are 435 House members with a varying number of members per state based on the state’s population.

What are the requirements to be a Senator or Representative?

A Representative must be:

- 25 years of age
- a citizen of the United States for 7 years
- at the time of election, a resident in the district of the state to be represented.

A Senator must be:

- 30 years of age
- a citizen of the United States for 9 years
- at the time of election, a resident of the state to be represented.

How often are members of the Senate and House elected?

Members of the Senate are elected to 6-year terms. One-third of the Senate seats (those that are expiring) and all 435 seats in the House of Representatives are open for election every two years. The next national election will be on November 8, 2016.

What is the essential difference between the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives?

Under the Constitution, the two chambers are equal. Neither can promulgate laws without the other. Although they are equal, the Constitution does give certain exclusive powers to each chamber. Nominees chosen by the President to serve as judges, ambassadors, cabinet officers, and senior executives must be confirmed by the Senate. Treaties negotiated with foreign nations must be ratified by the Senate. The House has no formal role in either process.

However, the Constitution gives the House the authority to originate all revenue (tax) bills and, through historical precedent, this authority has been extended to all appropriations (spending) bills as well. Although these money bills must begin in the House, the Senate has full opportunity to debate and

modify the legislation sent to it by the House and, as with all bills, both chambers must pass a bill before it can be sent to the President.

FEDERAL LEGISLATION

What is the difference between an appropriations bill and an authorization bill?

An appropriations bill provides the legal authority needed to spend or obligate U.S. Treasury funds. Twelve annual appropriations bills fund the entire federal government. The bills are supposed to be enacted prior to the start of a new fiscal year, designated as October 1. Failure to meet the deadline results in the need for temporary short-term funding or governmental agencies and offices will shut down. For example, funding for the Title VIII Nursing Workforce Education Programs at the Health Resources and Services Administration is contained in an appropriations bill.

An authorization bill provides the authority for a program or agency to exist and determines its policy and structure. It also recommends spending levels to carry out a defined policy, but these levels are not binding. Authorizations may be annual, multiyear, or permanent. Expiring programs require reauthorizations. House and Senate rules require that authorization be in place before final funding decisions are made, though this rule frequently is waived or disregarded. The ***Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*** is an example of an authorization bill.

What is the difference between discretionary funding and mandatory funding?

Discretionary spending refers to spending set by annual appropriation levels made by congressional decisions. This spending is optional, in contrast to entitlement programs (e.g. Medicare and Medicaid) for which funding are mandatory. For example, funding for the mental health programs at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration is discretionary spending.

Mandatory spending accounts for two-thirds of federal budget. These funds are not controlled by an annual decision of Congress but are automatically obligated by virtue of previously enacted laws. For example, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, and social security are entitlement programs — funding for them falls under mandatory spending.

What is a CR?

A continuing resolution or CR is a short-term or long-term temporary funding bill that funds the federal government after September 30 until a permanent appropriations measure is passed and signed into law.

What is a reconciliation bill?

A reconciliation bill makes changes to laws required to meet preset spending and revenue levels. A reconciliation bill may be considered when permitted by a budget resolution passed by the House and Senate. The House Budget Committee packages the bills produced by the substantive committees of jurisdiction into one omnibus bill.

What is an omnibus bill?

An omnibus bill is a large bill that combines many different aspects of a particular subject. In the last few years, Congress has passed an omnibus appropriations bill to fund the entire government.

HOW CONGRESS WORKS

When does the government's fiscal year start?

For the federal government, the fiscal year (FY) is October 1 to September 30 of the following calendar year.

What does sponsor/cosponsor of a bill mean?

A sponsor is the Senator or Representative who introduces the measure. A cosponsor is a member of Congress who joins in sponsoring legislation but is not the member who introduced the measure.

Who is a Chair/Ranking Member of a committee/subcommittee?

The chair of a committee is the presiding officer of a committee or subcommittee — this is usually based on seniority of committee tenure. The ranking member is the highest ranking (and usually longest serving) minority member of a committee or subcommittee.

What is a caucus?

A caucus is an informal organization of members of the House or the Senate, or both, that exists to discuss issues of mutual concern and possibly to perform legislative research and policy planning for its members. There are regional, political or ideological, ethnic, and economic-based caucuses. Examples include the House and Senate Nursing Caucuses.

What is cloture?

Cloture is the only procedure by which the Senate can vote to place a time limit on consideration of a bill or other matter and, thereby, overcome a filibuster. Under the cloture rule (Rule XXII), the Senate may limit consideration of a pending matter to 30 additional hours, but only by vote of three-fifths of the full Senate, normally 60 votes.

What is a filibuster?

A filibuster is an attempt to block or delay Senate action on a bill or other matter by debating it at length, by offering numerous procedural motions, or by any other delaying or obstructive action.

What does germane mean?

Germane means that an amendment must address the same subject as the underlying bill. The purpose of the germaneness rule is to provide for the orderly consideration of amendments to bills and resolutions by requiring a relationship between the amendment and the matter being amended. The germaneness rule applies both to amendments and to other motions that have the same effect (i.e. a

motion to recommit). If the amendment and the underlying provision are not related, the amendment is subject to a point of order and cannot be offered.

What is a markup?

A markup is the process by which congressional committees and subcommittees debate, amend, and rewrite proposed legislation.

What is unanimous consent?

A procedure whereby a matter is considered agreed to if no Member on the floor objects. A unanimous consent motion can save time by eliminating the need for a vote. This procedure is usually reserved for non-controversial bills that will easily pass either chamber.

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