

The Congress and Its Work

Homeland Security Pork

- In 2004 the Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry warned that the Bush administration was not doing enough to close the “preparedness gap,” and a Council on Foreign Relations study issued under the title “Drastically Underfunded, Dangerously Unprepared” called for spending \$100 billion more.
- In Fiscal Year 2009 total spending was over \$50 billion.
- Rural Wyoming, for example, gets five times as many federal dollars per capita as do California and New York. In fact, of the ten cities classified by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as most-at-risk, only Washington, DC (where members of Congress spend much of their time), is among the top ten in federal assistance.
- Critics have pointed to scores of examples such as these:
 - Santa Clara County, CA, purchased Segway scooters for its bomb squad.
 - The Princeton, NJ, fire department purchased Nautilus equipment and a Bowflex machine.
 - Columbus, OH, purchased Kevlar vests for its police dogs.
 - Washington, DC, spent money on a computerized car-towing system and a summer jobs program.
 - Newark, NJ, bought air-conditioned garbage trucks.
 - Converse, TX, uses a newly purchased emergency disaster trailer to haul lawnmowers.
- Additionally, federal funds went to other more worthwhile requests that were not obviously related to terrorism such as forest fire claims in New Mexico and a federal child pornography tip line.
- As the preceding examples indicate, however, something other than rational analysis seems to be at work. Much of the explanation lies in the structure of Congress.
- These agencies are under the jurisdiction of nearly 90 different congressional committees and subcommittees.

Making the Connection

- Homeland security is not an isolated example of a process gone awry.

Congress: The First Branch

- Historically, the most important have been the “power of the purse”—the power to tax and spend—and the “power of the sword”—the power to declare war. Additionally, through the “necessary and proper” clause, Congress has asserted broad powers over many different aspects of American life.
- Similar to many of the world’s parliaments, Congress is bicameral, consisting of two chambers: an upper chamber called the Senate and a lower chamber called the House of Representatives.
- A Speaker of the House once called the Senate “a nice quiet place where good Representatives go when they die.” The Senate has a quick response to such jibes: In all of American history, only one senator (Henry Clay) has given up a Senate seat to run for the House, and that was in 1811.

- The General Accounting Office (GAO), the watchdog agency of Congress that oversees the operation of the executive branch, employs more than 3,000 people. A smaller number of people work for the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). This agency provides Congress with expert economic projections and budgetary information.

The Organization of Congress

- Similar to other large decision-making bodies, the House and Senate have evolved an extensive division of labor—the committee system—as well as a means of organizing large numbers of people to make decisions—the party leadership structure. The Constitution says nothing about either committees or parties; they have developed to meet the needs of elected officials.
- It operates in more of a follow-the-rules fashion than the Senate, which is small enough to operate by informal coordination and negotiation.

Speaker of the House

- The Constitution stipulates that the House shall elect a Speaker to be its presiding officer.
- In 2009, for example, Speaker Nancy Pelosi participated in only 5 percent of the recorded votes.
- Powerful Speakers awarded the chairmanships of important committees to their close allies, made all committees assignments, and punished disloyal members by removing them from committees on which they had previously served.

Party Leadership: House

- The Speaker's chief lieutenant is the majority leader. Chosen by the majority party caucus, majority leaders are responsible for the day-to-day work necessary to build political coalitions and enact laws: scheduling legislation, coordinating committee activity, and negotiating with the president, the Senate, and the minority party.
- The minority party caucus elects a minority leader who coordinates the minority's attempts to improve or defeat majority legislation.
- Different points of view flourish within parties, and it falls to the leadership to prevent minor spats and quarrels from developing into destructive feuds.
- The majority and minority leaders are assisted by whips, who link the leadership to the party's rank-and-file. The whips communicate leadership positions and strategies to the troops, count votes, and report rank-and-file opinions back to the leadership.
- Finally, Democratic members belong to their party caucus and Republican members belong to their party conference—meetings of the full party membership.

Party Leadership: Senate

- Given that the Senate consists of two members from each state—an even number—the Constitution provides for a tie-breaking mechanism by giving vice presidents the authority to preside over the Senate and to cast a tie-breaking vote *when necessary*. The Constitution also provides for a president pro tempore, who serves as the Senate's presiding officer in the vice president's absence (which is nearly all the time).

- Indeed, one of the main jobs of Senate leaders is to hammer out unanimous-consent agreements that set forth the terms and conditions according to which the Senate will consider a bill; these are individually negotiated by the leadership for each bill and are acceptable to all senators with any interest in a given proposal. These agreements specify the terms of debate—the amendments that will be in order, how long they will be debated, when votes will be taken, and so forth.
- The Senate has a tradition of unlimited debate: the filibuster, a delaying tactic by which one or more senators refuse to allow a bill or resolution to be considered, either by speaking indefinitely or by offering dilatory motions and amendments. The only way to silence a filibuster is for the Senate to adopt a cloture motion ending debate, which requires the support of 60 senators.

Ups and Downs of the Congressional Parties

- In practice, it is difficult to measure party influence precisely because it often coincides with constituency sentiments and members' own views.
- The members of each party are more similar than they used to be, and, collectively, they are more distinct from the other party than they used to be.
- When party members are more diverse in their views, however, as in the mid-twentieth century, they are reluctant to give power to party leaders—who may act in ways objectionable, or even politically dangerous, to many of the rank-and-file.
- When Democrats swept into power during the Great Depression, they included both northern liberals and southern conservatives, so leaders remained relatively weak. The social changes of the 1960s and 1970s, though, produced more polarized parties.
- Part of the answer is that an effective congressional party contributes to members' electoral prospects.
- As a result, they are willing to tolerate constraints imposed by their leadership—indeed, to pass rules formalizing and strengthening such limits—because they do not want to undermine the party's effectiveness.
- Another part of the answer is that members who opposed some of the party's positions may be compensated in other ways.
- The House and Senate campaign committees are controlled by the leadership and most members of the leadership have established their own PACs.
- In addition, a recent study finds that moderate party members who go along with the core positions of their parties are compensated with greater pork barrel spending for their districts.
- Finally, members of Congress willingly accept some party discipline because they see it as necessary for attaining important policy goals.

The Committee System

- Since 1990, for example, on average about 9,000 bills have been introduced in each two year session of the House of Representatives.