

Act

Legislation that has passed in both the House and the Senate, and becomes law.

Amendment

A change to a bill, motion or article of the Constitution.

Appropriation

A formal approval to draw funds from the Treasury for specific purposes.

Authorization

A law that creates a program and sets funding limits. Funds are actually drawn from the Treasury and the determined amount is established by appropriation.

Bill

A proposed law.

Budget

The President's annual proposal to Congress, usually submitted in January, for federal expenditures and revenues for the coming fiscal year.

Budget Resolution

House and Senate-passed guidelines, and later caps, on federal budget authority and outlays. It is a matter of internal Congressional rules and procedure, and therefore is not submitted to the President for signature or veto. Bills that would exceed budget caps are subject to a point of order – although waivers have been granted in both houses.

Cloture

A method of limiting debate or ending a filibuster in the Senate. Sixty of the 100 senators must vote in favor of cloture for it to occur.

Conference Committee

A committee comprised of senators and representatives appointed to resolve differences between House and Senate-passed versions of the same legislation.

Congressional Record

A verbatim report of all that is said and done in the House and Senate (although members have an opportunity to revise their remarks before publication), except for executive sessions. Whole speeches that are inserted into the Record often have not been delivered on the floor. An appendix contains material from representatives not spoken on the floor, but published by permission – “extensions of remarks.”

Continuing Resolution

A resolution enacted to allow specific Executive Branch agencies to continue operating even though funds have not been appropriated for them for the following fiscal year.

Cosponsor

A senator or representative who joins in sponsoring a piece of legislation but is not the one who introduced the legislation. A large number of cosponsors increases a bill's chance for consideration.

Filibuster

A delaying tactic to prevent action in the Senate by speaking continuously.

Fiscal year

The federal government's fiscal year runs from October 1 to September 30.

Hearing

Meetings of committees or subcommittees to gather information on the ramifications of proposed legislation, investigate problems or explore issues. Witnesses present testimony and answer questions.

Lame Duck

A member of Congress (or the President) who has not been re-elected but whose term has not yet ended.

Lobbying

Attempts by individuals or groups who are not members of Congress to influence the passage, defeat or content of legislation.

Majority Leader

The leader of the majority party and the most powerful position in the Senate. In the House, the floor leader and principal assistant to the Speaker (the most powerful position in the House).

Mark-Up

After hearings, members of a committee or subcommittee examine a proposed piece of legislation, line by line, to determine what additions or deletions should be made.

Member

A U.S. senator or representative.

Minority Leader

The leader of the minority party in the House or Senate.

Override a Veto

When both the House and the Senate vote, by a two-thirds majority, to set aside a Presidential veto of legislation.

Point of Order

An objection by a member of Congress that the pending matter or proceeding is in violation of the rules.

President Pro Tempore

The temporary presiding officer of the Senate, who services when the Vice President of the U.S. is absent (which is most of the time).

Quorum

A majority of members duly chosen and sworn, 218 in the House and 51 in the Senate. A quorum is necessary to conduct business.

Ranking Minority Member

First in seniority on a committee of the minority party.

Recess

Concludes legislative day, with a set time for reconvening – usually more than three days of adjournment.

Reconciliation

Process by which the authorizing committees in the House and Senate change the various programs they administer in order to meet the federal budget target figures.

Report

A printed record of a committee's actions and views on a particular bill or matter.

Rider

A legislative "rider" is an unrelated item that is attached to a bill so it may "ride" to approval. Riders are often attached to appropriations bills.

Speaker of the House

The presiding officer of the House of Representatives, leader of the majority party in the House, and next in line to the Vice President for succession to the presidency. One of the most powerful offices in the federal government.

Sponsor

The representative or senator who introduces a bill or resolution.

Suspension of the Rules

An expedited procedure for considering legislation in the House. Time for debate is severely restricted, no floor amendments are allowed, but a two-thirds majority is required for passage.

Tabling Motion

A proposal to remove a bill from immediate consideration. It is often used to kill a measure.

Unanimous Consent

Almost any rule in the House or Senate can be overlooked by unanimous consent. The Senate relies on unanimous consent agreements to define legislative ground rules for particular measures, which protects the rights of the minority party and forces members to work with one another. The House uses unanimous consent agreements relatively sparingly – usually to adopt a non-controversial measure – and legislative ground rules are set by majority, often party-line, votes.

Whip

The senator or representative who serves as an internal lobbyist for the Republican or Democratic party to persuade legislators to support their party's position, and who counts the votes for the leadership in advance of floor action.