

Congress -- The Key Concepts

1. To reflect shifts in population, seats are reapportioned among the states after every decennial census. Since the 1960's, this process has caused a major shift of seats from the Northeast and the Midwest to the Sun Belt states and the South. Under the Supreme Court's "one person - one vote" rule, no district can be malapportioned. To meet this judicially mandated standard, state legislatures must redraw district boundary lines after every census. The redistricting process inevitably involves maneuvering for partisan advantage.
2. Because senators and representatives are ultimately responsible for their own electoral survival, they develop their own campaign organizations to run their candidate-centered campaigns. A prominent pattern in congressional elections: incumbents win.
3. The functions of Congress within the political system extend beyond law making to include oversight of administration, public education, and representation. Because their primary concern is reelection, members of Congress concentrate on constituency service in terms of pork barreling and casework.
4. Committees are major and specialized power centers with Congress that frame legislation for consideration. Committees have the power to block and delay legislation as well as the power to develop and refine bills. The committee and subcommittee systems tend to decentralize power within Congress. Committee chairmen are still chosen primarily on the basis of seniority, but they must now be more responsive to their party colleagues because they are elected to their posts.
5. Congress is organized on a partisan basis, and party affiliation is a major predictor of how members will vote. The political parties in Congress exhibit different policy and ideological orientations on roll call votes. Party leaders in Congress have limited formal powers and must rely heavily on more informal, collegial techniques.
6. The lengthy, complex legislative process of Congress requires building majorities at each stage. As a result, proponents of legislation must often bargain and compromise to secure its passage.