

Congressional Glossary of Terms

This glossary is intended merely as a basic explanation of commonly used legislative/congressional terms for those readers that are unfamiliar.

Adjournment Sine Die - The final adjournment of a session of a Congress, usually occurring in Oct., Nov. or Dec. of even-numbered years.

Amendment - A proposal to change the language of a bill, can be offered in Committee or on the Floor.

Appropriations Bill - A bill reported out of the House or Senate Appropriations Committee, which appropriates funds approved by authorization bills.

Authorization Bill - A bill reported out of an authorizing committee, which authorizes a government program that eventually is funded by an appropriations bill.

Bill - A legislative proposal introduced by a member of Congress. Bills are designated as HR (House of Representatives) or S (Senate) according to the body in which they are introduced, and assigned numbers according to the order in which they are introduced. Most bills are public bills, dealing with general issues. Private bills deal with individual claims against the government, such as immigration cases and land disputes.

Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 - The law by which Congress changed its budget process; the act also created the Congressional Budget Office and the Senate and House Budget Committees.

Budget Authority - Authority to enter into obligations that will result in immediate or future outlays involving federal funds. The basic forms of budget authority are appropriations, contract authority and borrowing authority.

Budget Committees - A committee in each chamber that coordinates spending legislation and formulates the overall congressional budget.

Budget Resolution - Concurrent resolution of both the House and Senate that prescribes spending limits in the various areas of government activity.

Calendar - The agenda for pending legislative business.

Clerk of the House - The chief administrative officer of the House of Representatives.

Cloakrooms - Small rooms for Democrats and Republicans located off the floor of the Senate and House of Representatives, where members can go for strategy conferences and phone calls.

Closed Rule - A rule granted by the House Rules Committee that prohibits amendments to a particular bill during floor action. Under a "closed rule" the House must either accept or reject the bill as recommended by the sponsoring committee.

Cloture - The procedure by which a filibuster can be ended in the Senate. Cloture requires the signatures of 16 Senators and the votes of three-fifths of the Senate.

Committee of the Whole House - This device enables the House to act with a quorum of 100 instead of the normally required 218. The House itself becomes a "committee" and is assisted by the parliamentarian. All debate is confined to the pending bill. After it has considered a bill as a "committee of the whole," the "committee" is dissolved and the House then takes up the bill for final action.

Concurrent Resolution - A statement of opinion approved by a simple majority in the House and Senate but not sent to the President for approval.

Conference Committee - A special committee formed to reconcile differences between differing versions of a bill passed by the Senate and House. Conference committee members, or conferees, are appointed from the bill's sponsoring committees in each chamber.

Congressional Record - The daily printed account of the proceedings of the House and Senate.

Congressional Terms of Office - Congressional terms normally begin on January 3 of the year following a general election. They are two years long for Representatives, six for Senators.

Continuing Resolution - Spending bill that provides funds for government operations for a short period of time until Congress and the President agree on an appropriation bill.

Enrolled Bill - The final copy of a bill that has been passed in identical form by both the Senate and the House.

Executive Session - (1) A meeting of a Senate or House committee (or occasionally of either chamber) that only its members may attend. Witnesses regularly appear at committee meetings in executive session - for example, Defense Department officials during presentations of classified defense information. Other members of Congress may be invited, but the public and press are not allowed to attend. (2) A Senate meeting devoted to the consideration of treaties and nominations.

Filibuster - A time-delaying tactic associated with the Senate and used by a minority in an effort to delay, modify or defeat a bill or amendment that probably would pass if voted on directly. The most common method is to take advantage of the Senate's rules permitting unlimited debate.

Fiscal year - The federal government's annual accounting period. Financial operations of the government are carried out in a 12-month accounting year, beginning on October 1 and ending on September 30. The fiscal year carries the date of the calendar year in which it ends and is referred to as FY; for example, fiscal year 2001 begins on October 1, 2000 and ends on September 30, 2001.

Germane - Pertaining to the purpose of a bill.

Hearing - House and Senate Committee session in which testimony regarding legislation is taken from interested parties.

Joint Committee - A committee composed of both House and Senate members.

Joint Resolution - A statement of opinion approved by a simple majority in the House and Senate and sent to the President for approval to have the force of law.

Line Item Veto Act - Gave the President authority to cancel discretionary spending, items of new direct spending, and limited tax benefits, which may only be overridden by a two-thirds vote in Congress. Ruled unconstitutional.

Majority Leader - The leading spokesperson and legislative strategist for the party in control of either the House or the Senate.

Majority Whip - The assistant majority leader in the House or Senate.

Marking Up a Bill - The process of going through a bill section-by-section in subcommittee, or committee and considering possible changes.

Minority Leader - The leading spokesperson and legislative strategist for the minority party in either the House or Senate.

Minority Whip - The assistant minority leader in either House or Senate.

Omnibus Bill - A bill containing several separate but related items.

Ordered Reported - The process of moving a bill out of a committee. A full committee approves a bill and orders it "reported" to the House or Senate. The bill has cleared the committee but is not ready for floor action. The committee first must write a report explaining the bill. The report may contain "majority views" (opinion of the committee's majority), "minority views" and "individual views" or "additional views." The bill and report are then filed in the House or Senate and at that point the bill is considered "reported."

Override a Veto - A procedure that Congress may enact when the President refuses to sign a bill into law. Requires a two-thirds vote in each chamber. If this vote occurs, the bill then becomes law over the President's objections.

Presiding Officer - A majority-party Senator who presides over the Senate and is charged with maintaining order and decorum, recognizing Members to speak, and interpreting the Senate's rules, practices and precedents.

President Pro Tempore - The presiding officer of the Senate in the Vice President's absence, elected by the full Senate, usually the most senior member of the majority party.

Public Laws - A public bill or joint resolution that has passed both chambers and been enacted into law.

Quorum - The required minimum number of members present for the House or Senate to conduct official business (51 in the Senate, 218 in the House). Both houses usually assume a quorum is present even if it is not.

Recommit to Committee - A motion to return a bill to the committee that reported it after it has been debated on the floor.

Reconciliation - The process whereby Congress enforces a budget resolution which requires the authorizing and appropriations committees to spend within the resolution's prescribed limits.

Reporting a Bill - Action a committee takes after approving a bill. A committee that has been examining a bill "reports" its findings and recommendations to the chamber when it completes consideration and returns the measure.

Rider - An amendment, usually not germane, which its sponsor hopes to get through more easily by including it in other legislation.

Rule - The instructions on the time and substance of debate on a House bill, which are attached to the bill when reported out to the floor by the House Rules Committee.

Secretary of the Senate - The Senate's chief administrative officer responsible for overseeing the duties of Senate employees, educating Senate pages, administering oaths, handling lobbyists' registrations and other tasks.

Select or Special Committee - A committee set up for a special purpose and, usually, for a limited time, by resolution of either the House or Senate.

Speaker of the House - The elected presiding officer of the House of Representatives.

Special Session - A session held after Congress has adjourned sine die. Special sessions are convened by the President.

Suspension of Rules - The process where the Senate and House may suspend their usual rules on the first and third Mondays of each month and during the last six days of a session if two-thirds of a quorum vote affirmatively. A bill may then be brought up immediately for a debate limited to twenty minutes for each side. No amendments are permitted.

Table a Bill - Motions to table, or to "lay on the table", are used to block or kill amendments or other parliamentary questions. When approved, a tabling motion is considered the final disposition of that issue. One of the most widely used parliamentary procedures, the motion to table, is not debatable, and adoption requires a simple majority vote.

Unanimous Consent - A process for approving noncontroversial bills without serious debate. Used to expedite floor action and frequently used in a routine fashion.

US Code - A consolidation and codification of the general and permanent laws of the United States arranged by subject under 50 titles. The first six deal with general or political subjects, and the other 44 are alphabetically arranged from agriculture to war.

Veto - The rejection of a bill by the President.

Voice Vote - Voting in unison yes or no by voice, with no record of how individuals voted.

Well - The area in front of the speaker's rostrum from which House members address the House.

Whip - A key assistant to a party leader in the House or Senate.