

Electing America's Lawmakers

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

While Americans and others around the world are excited about who will become the next U.S. President, voters are also, on the same day, electing the new U.S. Congress, the two-house national legislature that in many ways is just as important as the man who will occupy the White House.

In the system of government established by the U.S. Constitution, the executive and legislative branches share in decision-making, while also serving as a check and balance for each other, explains L. Sandy Maisel, professor of government at Colby College in Maine.

For example:

- The Senate, the upper house of Congress, must give its approval for any treaties the President wants to sign;
- or for appointments such as ambassadors, federal judges, Cabinet members;
- the President cannot declare war without approval of two-thirds of the 100-member Senate;
- the President cannot even introduce laws, only sign those introduced and passed by the Congress;
- and though the President can veto laws, members of Congress can overrule him and pass them anyway if they can get enough votes.

The judicial branch provides yet a third way to control abuse of power, a principal consideration for the founders of the American Republic who had just won independence from the authoritarian British king when they were writing the Constitution.

Unlike a parliamentary system, where the chief executive is selected by the majority in the legislature, Americans

vote separately for the President/Vice President team; for a member of the Senate; and for a member of the House of Representatives. All of these contests appear on the same ballot, and it is possible for a voter to choose candidates from two or more different parties, or to select independents.

"Members of Congress...are not dependent on party leaders for re-election and often express that independence by voting for the interests of their constituents, even when they differ from party positions," says Maisel. However, they may also lose the influence in Congress that they need to help their constituents if they are too rebellious against party policy.

"The American legislature, which is called the Congress, is very dynamic and representative and is more autonomous than most of the legislatures in India," says M. Saleem Kidwai, professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of International Studies in New Delhi. "The Congress plays an important role in policymaking in the U.S. So this election is of great importance to countries like India that have close and strategic relations with the U.S. that are bound to increase."

This year 470 seats in Congress are to be filled in the November 4 general election. That includes the entire 435-member House of Representatives where the Democrats hold 236 seats, or a 54.2 percent majority, and Republicans hold 199 seats. Incumbents usually fare well in U.S. congression-

al elections. So the races to watch are those in which the office-holder is retiring, or in which a candidate was recently appointed to the seat to fill a vacancy caused by death or some other reason.

The Senate election could provide edge-of-the-seat election night excitement. The Senate is split 49-49 between Democrats and Republicans, plus two independents who vote with the Democrats. The control of the upper house could swing either way, although Republicans have more to lose: 23 Republican-held seats are up for election, versus 12 seats held by Democrats.

The writers of the Constitution intended members of the House of Representatives to be close to their constituents. Therefore, they designed the body to be relatively large, with members representing districts of similar-size populations, grouped by state. Alaska, for example, has few residents, and therefore holds only one seat in the House. California is the most populous, and holds 53 seats. That gives the Golden State a lot of power.

But, in the Senate, California has two votes, just like tiny Rhode Island. The founders—fearing that more populous states might impose policies against the interests of smaller ones—wanted each state to have an equal voice in the upper house. Also, the Senators were given longer terms, with the view that they could take a more dispassionate look at issues, and be less swayed by the immediate concerns of the day.

"It is not only possible, but common, for one political party to control the White House and the other party to

The U.S. Congress Consists of Two Houses

The Senate,

called the upper house

- 100 members, two for each state
- Six-year terms
- One-third face election every two years

The House of Representatives,

called the lower house

- 435 voting members, serve districts of mostly equal population
- Two-year terms
- All face election every two years

control one or both branches of the Congress," notes Maisel. This means Presidents and Congressional leaders often reach a consensus to enact new laws or take major decisions. For the most part, this provides stability to American policy over the long run.

"...Without bipartisan support in Congress, no President can succeed," says Kidwai. "The President needs cooperation of the two houses, whether it is (John) McCain or (Barack) Obama."

In order to effectively apply oversight, Congress delegates responsibilities to congressional committees—legislative sub-organizations that specialize in knowledge of a single matter important to the American people.

One of these is the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, currently led by Chairman Joseph R. Biden, Jr., a Democrat. It is one of the oldest Senate committees and plays a crucial role in shaping U.S. foreign policy. It oversees the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the Peace Corps. This committee approved President George W. Bush's nomination of U.S. Ambassador to India David C. Mulford.

On May 30, Senator Russ Feingold, a prominent Democrat from Wisconsin, visited India on behalf of the Foreign Relations Committee. Other members, Senator Biden, Senator John Kerry, and Senator Chuck Hagel, were in India earlier this year. The committee deals with such topics as the fight against terrorism, economic advancement, and the sharing of nuclear technology.

Members of the executive branch of government, such as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, must report to Congress and answer questions when requested. The Constitution requires even the President to give an annual report to the combined House and Senate, in the State of the Union address.

Contributors to this article include the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs, Aaron Schwartz and Lisa Swenarski de Herrera.

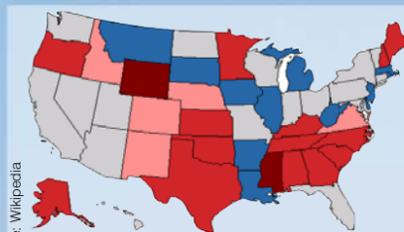
For more information:

The U.S. House of Representatives

www.house.gov/

The U.S. Senate

<http://senate.gov/>



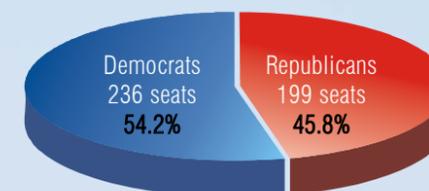
Senate seats up for election:

- Two Republican incumbents
- Republican incumbent
- Retiring Republican
- Democratic incumbent
- No election

Elections for 35 of the 100 seats
Currently
49 Republicans
49 Democrats
2 independents

House of Representatives Elections for all 435 seats

Currently



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