

APGOVPOL

Chapter 12: Congress

Key Words and Terms, Defined

advertising: according to David Mayhew, one of three primary activities undertaken by members of Congress to increase the probability of their re-election; advertising involves contacts between members and their constituents between elections (see also credit claiming and position taking)

bicameral legislature: a legislature divided into two houses; the U.S. Congress and every American state legislature except Nebraska's are bicameral

bill: a proposed law, drafted in precise, legal language; anyone can draft a bill, but only a member of the House of Representatives or the Senate can formally submit a bill for consideration

casework: activities of members of Congress that help constituents as individuals; cutting through bureaucratic red tape to get constituents what they think they have a right to get (see also pork barrel)

caucus (congressional): a group of members of Congress sharing some interest or characteristic; most are composed of members from both parties and from both houses

committee chairs: the most important influencers of the congressional agenda; they play dominant roles in scheduling hearings, hiring staff, appointing subcommittees, and managing committee bills when they are brought before the full house

conference committees: congressional committees formed when the Senate and the House pass a particular bill in different forms; party leadership appoints members from each house to iron out the differences and bring back a single bill (see also standing committees, joint committees, and select committees)

credit claiming: according to David Mayhew, one of three primary activities undertaken by members of Congress to increase the probability of their re-election; it involves personal and district service (see also advertising and position taking)

filibuster: a strategy unique to the Senate whereby opponents of a piece of legislation try to talk it to death, based on the tradition of unlimited debate; today, 60 members present and voting can halt a filibuster (cloture)

House Rules Committee: an institution unique to the House of Representatives that reviews all bills (except revenue, budget, and appropriations bills) coming from a House committee before they go to the full House

incumbents: those persons already holding office; in congressional elections, incumbents usually win

instructed delegate: the role a legislator plays when they mirror the preferences of their constituents when voting on bills (compare trustee)

joint committees: congressional committees on a few subject-matter areas with membership drawn from both houses (see also standing committees, conference committees, and select committees)

legislative oversight: Congress's monitoring of the bureaucracy and its administration of policy, performed mainly through hearings

majority leader: the principle partisan ally of the Speaker of the House or the party's main leader in the Senate; responsible for scheduling bills, influencing committee assignments, and rounding up votes on behalf of the party's legislative positions

minority leader: the principle leader of the minority party in the House of Representatives or in the Senate

pork barrel: federal projects, grants, and contracts available to cities, businesses, colleges and institutions in the district of a member of Congress; such projects are chiefly meant to benefit a legislator's home district or state, and are a major advantage of incumbents in their re-election efforts

position taking: according to David Mayhew, one of three primary activities undertaken by members of Congress to increase the probability of their re-election; it involves taking a stand on issues and responding to constituents about these positions (see also advertising and credit taking)

select committees: congressional committees appointed for a specific purpose and for a specific time period, such as the Watergate investigation (see also joint committees, standing committees, and conference committees)

seniority system: a simple rule for picking committee chairs, in effect until the 1970s; the member who had served on the longest and whose party controlled Congress became chair, regardless of party loyalty, mental state, or competence

Speaker of the House: an office mandated by the Constitution; the Speaker is chosen in practice by the majority party, has both formal and informal powers, and is second in line to succeed to the presidency should that office become vacant

standing committees: separate subject-matter committees in each house of Congress that handle bills in different policy areas; a large, permanent congressional committee (see also joint committees, conference committees, and select committees)

whips: party leaders who work with the majority leader or minority leader to count votes beforehand and lean on waverers whose votes are crucial to a bill favored (or opposed) by the party; the assistant floor leader for both major political parties in both houses of Congress