

Congressional Behavior



While voters elect representatives who may or may not share their policy preferences and interests, they still expect their elected officials to be an active voice and participant in the Congressional system. Voters want their representatives to be effective but also want to know what they have been up to and what they have accomplished. There has to be a balance between the time spent at home for their constituents and their time in Congress. The complicated nature of Congress, including committees, the legislation process, bill sponsorship, and negotiations can be a difficulty for constituents to see what exactly their representatives are doing on a day-to-day basis.

Voting Decisions

Members of Congress must consider several factors when voting for a law.

First, they must consider the interests of the people they represent. If they vote against the wishes of their constituents then they will face a significant backlash towards their actions. However, if they are incumbents then they may be more willing to act against their interests if they feel that by doing so it is the right course of action to take.

Secondly, a member's political party also influences how that member will vote. Their vote is influenced by that member's congressional staff as well as interest groups and campaign donors. Research has shown that the preferences of the average voters does **not** count as much as upper-income voters and donors.

Finally, the president influences representatives to vote a certain way, especially when they are of the same political party.

Members of Congress may play three roles.

The Delegate Role: *the idea that the main duty of a member of Congress is to vote according to their constituents wishes.*

The Trustee Role: *the idea that members of Congress should make decisions based on their knowledge and judgement.*

The Politico Role: *the representation where members of Congress balance their choices with the interests of their constituents and political parties in their decision making process.*

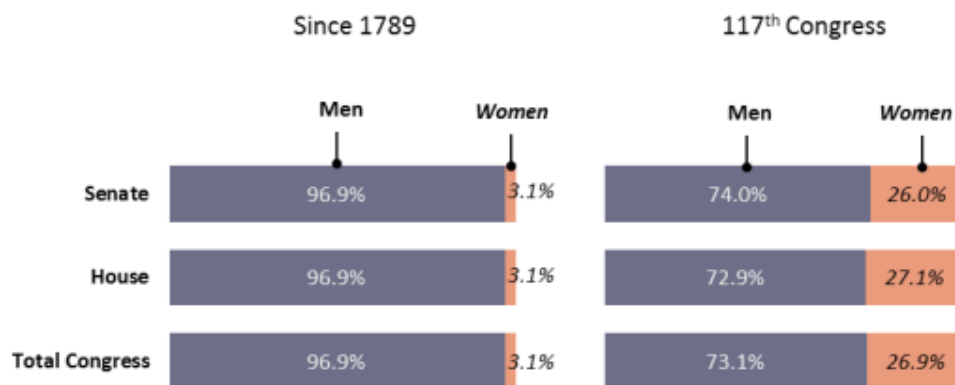
Elections are the main method where voters decide the actions of their representatives. Candidates make promises during their campaigns and if they are not kept then constituents can vote them out of office in future elections. Sadly, most constituents are poorly informed, have little interest, or lack sound party preferences. Some however, are better informed than others, especially if they are part of an interest group that actively influences congressional actions.

Members of Congress today do not come close to mirroring the American electorate. As a whole, members of Congress tend to be older, whiter, wealthier, and more educated than the American electorate.

Substantive Representation takes place when members of Congress represent the interests and policy preferences of their constituents. They are bringing unconsidered issues to the foreground on behalf of underrepresented constituents, and these actions may enlarge Congress's agenda. Presenting information to fellow members of Congress is an important part of representation.

Women in Congress overview.

[The 117th Congress covered the time period from January 3, 2021, to January 3, 2023].



The Problem of Partisanship

In recent years, members of parties vote and act strongly within their own party and become less likely to cooperate with members of the opposition party.

What is partisanship in politics?

A partisan is a committed member or supporter of a political party or political movement. In multi-party systems, the term is used for persons who strongly support their party's policies and are reluctant to compromise with political opponents.

Voting records for both the House of Representatives and the Senate show a clear trend away from **Bipartisanship**: *the agreement between the parties to work together in Congress to pass legislation.*

Intense partisanship can lead to hostility between members. It may also lead to a period of **Gridlock**: *a slowdown or halt in Congress's ability to legislate and overcome divisions, especially those based on partisanship.*

Gridlock is more likely to be seen in a time of **Divided Government**: *when control of the presidency and one or both chambers of Congress are split between the two major parties.*

Partisanship may also result in presidential initiatives and nominees being blocked by the opposing party, especially when there is a **Lame Duck Period**: *the period at the end of a presidential term when Congress may block presidential initiatives and nominees.*

Representation and lawmaking in Congress has always been, and still is, messy and sometimes out of control. One has to remember that even though the legislative branch of government is the first mentioned in the Constitution, it is still only one of three divisions. Gridlock has become more common in recent years than ever before.

