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GOVERNMENT 101



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FOUNDATIONS OF U.S. GOVERNMENT

Core principles

Several key principles serve as the foundation for how the U.S. government functions:

- **Popular sovereignty** – Government authority comes from the people. Citizens hold the power through voting and civic participation.
- **Separation of powers** – Power is divided among the legislative, executive and judicial branches to prevent any one branch from becoming too powerful.
- **Checks and balances** – Each branch has the ability to limit the powers of the others. This system ensures accountability and cooperation among branches.
- **Federalism** – Power is shared between the national government and the states. Each level of government has its own responsibilities and authority.
- **Rule of law** – Everyone, including government officials, must follow the law. The Constitution and the legal system ensure fairness and protect individual rights.

U.S. Constitution

The U.S. government is built on a framework created by the Constitution, a document that outlines how the government operates and defines the rights of the people. Adopted in 1787, the Constitution remains the highest law of the land and guides the structure, powers and limits of government.

The Constitution begins with the Preamble, which states the purpose of the document and reflects the vision of the nation's founders. It is followed by seven articles that establish the three branches of government, describe the powers of each and outline the relationship between the federal and state governments. The first ten amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, were added in 1791 to protect individual liberties. Over time, additional amendments have addressed issues such as voting rights, civil rights and the balance of power.

Bill of Rights

The Bill of Rights is the name given to the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. Ratified in 1791, these amendments were added to ensure that individual freedoms and protections would be preserved under the new federal government. The Bill of Rights outlines specific limits on government power and guarantees a wide range of civil liberties for all people in the United States.

The Bill of Rights protects several fundamental rights that are central to American democracy. These include:

- **Freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly and petition** – The First Amendment protects the ability to express ideas, practice religion freely, gather in groups, publish opinions and communicate with government officials.
- **Right to bear arms** – The Second Amendment affirms the right to possess and carry weapons.
- **Protection from unreasonable searches and seizures** – The Fourth Amendment requires that government officials have a warrant or probable cause before entering private property or seizing personal belongings.
- **Rights of the accused** – Several amendments protect individuals involved in the legal process. These include the right to remain silent, the right to a fair and speedy trial, the right to legal counsel and protection against double jeopardy and cruel or unusual punishment.
- **Protection of property and due process** – The Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments protect individuals from being deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law. They also address compensation when private property is taken for public use.
- **Other rights and powers** – The Ninth Amendment notes that people have rights beyond those listed in the Constitution. The Tenth Amendment reserves powers not given to the federal government to the states or the people.



Separation of powers

The U.S. Constitution divides the powers of government among three separate branches: the legislative, executive and judicial. This structure is designed to prevent the concentration of power in any single branch and to promote efficiency, accountability and fairness in governing.

- **Legislative branch (Congress)** – Makes laws, approves the federal budget and confirms presidential appointments. It consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate.
- **Executive branch (President and federal agencies)** – Enforces and administers laws, conducts foreign policy and serves as commander in chief of the armed forces.
- **Judicial branch (Supreme Court and lower federal courts)** – Interprets laws and resolves disputes under the Constitution and federal statutes.

Each branch operates independently but works in cooperation with the others, reflecting a core principle of American government.

Checks and balances

The system of checks and balances gives each branch of government the ability to limit the powers of the other branches. This ensures that no branch becomes too powerful and that decisions are subject to oversight and review. Examples of checks and balances include:

- Congress can pass laws, but the president may veto them.
- The president appoints federal judges, but those appointments must be confirmed by the Senate.
- Courts can declare laws or executive actions unconstitutional through judicial review.
- Congress can override a presidential veto with a two-thirds vote in both chambers.
- The Senate can remove federal officials through impeachment and conviction.

This framework fosters cooperation while maintaining accountability and protecting constitutional principles.

Federalism

Federalism is a core principle of the U.S. government that divides power between the national government and the individual states. This structure allows both levels of government to operate within their own areas of authority while working together to serve the public.

Division of powers

The U.S. Constitution outlines which powers are held by the federal government and which are left to the states:

- **Enumerated powers** – These are powers specifically granted to the federal government by the Constitution. They include regulating interstate and foreign commerce, coining money, maintaining armed forces and conducting foreign policy.
- **Reserved powers** – Any power not given to the federal government is reserved for the states. This includes authority over public education, professional licensing, local law enforcement and most aspects of family and property law.
- **Concurrent powers** – Some powers are shared by both levels of government. These include the ability to tax, build infrastructure and enforce laws.

State and local government

Each state has its own constitution, legislature, executive branch and court system. States are responsible for addressing the day-to-day needs of their residents and can tailor laws and programs to reflect local values and conditions. Within states, local governments – such as counties, cities and towns – handle services like police and fire protection, water and sanitation, public transportation and zoning.

Balancing authority

Federalism allows for a balance of power that limits overreach by either the national or state governments. It encourages innovation by allowing states to develop their own policies while maintaining national unity on broader issues. This system of shared and divided responsibilities remains a defining feature of American government.



Learn more at
USA.gov

BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

Executive branch

Federal executive branch

The executive branch is responsible for enforcing and administering the laws of the United States. It is led by the president, who serves as both the head of state and the commander in chief of the armed forces. The branch also includes the vice president, the president's Cabinet and a wide range of federal departments and agencies.

Key functions

- Enforcing federal laws and court rulings.
- Proposing the federal budget and managing national finances.
- Conducting foreign relations and negotiating treaties
- Commanding the U.S. military.
- Issuing executive orders to manage operations of the federal government.
- Appointing federal officials and judges (with Senate confirmation).

Executive departments and agencies

The executive branch includes executive departments, such as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Defense (DoD), as well as numerous agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). These entities implement federal laws, administer programs and provide services to the public.

Presidential qualifications

To serve as U.S. President, a candidate must be a natural-born citizen of the United States, though the individual can be born abroad to parents who are American citizens. Candidates must also be at least 35 years of age and a resident of the United States for at least 14 years, but not necessarily the 14 years preceding the election.



Learn more at
[WhiteHouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov)

State executive branch

Each state has its own executive branch, led by a governor, who serves as the chief executive officer of the state government. Governors carry out state laws, oversee executive agencies and often play a key role in shaping state budgets and legislative priorities.

Key roles of a governor

- Signing or vetoing legislation passed by the state legislature.
- Managing the state's executive agencies and departments.
- Declaring states of emergency and deploying state resources.
- Recommending budget proposals to the legislature.
- Appointing officials to state boards, commissions or judicial vacancies (varies by state).

Other statewide executive officials

Depending on the state, other independently elected officials may include:

- **Lieutenant Governor** – often acts as a deputy to the governor and may preside over the state senate.
- **Attorney General** – serves as the chief legal officer of the state.
- **Secretary of State** – often oversees elections and maintains official records.
- **State Treasurer or Comptroller** – manages state finances and public funds.

The structure and powers of the executive branch vary by state, but all play a critical role in enforcing laws and managing day-to-day operations of government.



Learn more at
[NGA.org](https://www.nga.org)



Judicial branch

The judicial branch interprets laws, resolves disputes and ensures that government actions comply with the U.S. Constitution. It operates independently from the legislative and executive branches and plays a vital role in maintaining the rule of law.

U.S. Supreme Court

The U.S. Supreme Court is the highest court in the federal judiciary. It has final authority on constitutional questions and federal law. The Court hears a limited number of cases each year, often involving significant legal or constitutional issues.

Key Functions

- Reviews decisions made by lower federal and state courts.
- Determines the constitutionality of laws and executive actions.
- Resolves disputes between states or involving federal officials.
- Issues opinions that serve as binding precedent for all other courts.

Structure

- Consists of nine justices: one Chief Justice and eight Associate Justices.
- Justices are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

Once confirmed, justices serve lifetime appointments, unless they retire, resign or are removed through impeachment.

 Learn more at [SupremeCourt.gov](https://www.supremecourt.gov)

Lower federal courts

Below the Supreme Court, the federal court system includes:

- **U.S. Courts of Appeals (Circuit Courts)** – Hear appeals from district courts within their region. There are 13 appellate courts, including one for the Federal Circuit.
- **U.S. District Courts** – Serve as trial courts for federal cases involving civil and criminal law. Each state has at least one district court.

These courts hear a wide range of cases involving federal statutes, constitutional rights and disputes between states or residents of different states.

Qualifications and appointment

There are no formal qualifications outlined in the Constitution for becoming a federal judge or Supreme Court justice, such as age, citizenship or legal background. However, most nominees have extensive experience in law, often as judges, legal scholars or practicing attorneys.

- Federal judges and justices are nominated by the president.
- They must be confirmed by a majority vote in the U.S. Senate.
- Once confirmed, federal judges serve lifetime terms, unless removed through impeachment.

The independence of the judicial branch helps ensure fair application of the law and protection of individual rights under the Constitution. Through its decisions, the judiciary shapes how laws are understood and applied across the nation.

 Learn more at [USCourts.gov](https://uscourts.gov)



Legislative branch

The legislative branch is responsible for making laws. It is composed of elected representatives who serve at both the federal and state levels. Through legislation, this branch shapes public policy, authorizes spending and oversees the implementation of laws by the executive branch.

U.S. Congress

At the federal level, the legislative branch is known as Congress, a bicameral (two-chamber) body consisting of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

House of Representatives

- 435 members, apportioned by population.
- Serve two-year terms.
- Must be at least 25 years old, a U.S. citizen for seven years and a resident of the state they represent.

Senate

- 100 members (two per state).
- Serve six-year terms, with elections staggered every two years.
- Must be at least 30 years old, a U.S. citizen for nine years and a resident of the state they represent.

Key powers of Congress

- Pass federal laws.
- Approve the federal budget and authorize spending.
- Levy taxes and regulate commerce.
- Declare war and maintain the armed forces.
- Confirm presidential appointments and ratify treaties (Senate only).
- Conduct investigations and hold hearings.
- Impeach and remove federal officials.

Laws passed by Congress must be approved by both chambers and signed by the president to take effect, unless overridden by a two-thirds vote in each chamber.

 Learn more at
Congress.gov

State legislatures

Each state has its own legislature, typically modeled after Congress with a bicameral structure – except Nebraska, which has a unicameral (single-chamber) legislature.

State legislative structures

- Most have a House (or Assembly) and a Senate.
- The number of members and term lengths vary by state.
- Legislators are elected by district and serve part-time or full-time depending on the state.

Common powers of state legislatures

- Enact state laws and amend state constitutions.
- Approve the state budget and appropriate funding.
- Oversee state agencies and programs.
- Levy state taxes.
- Confirm gubernatorial appointments (in some states).
- Redraw legislative districts based on census data.

Qualifications for state legislators

- Vary by state, but generally include:
 - ⇒ Minimum age (usually 18 or 21)
 - ⇒ Residency in the district or state
 - ⇒ U.S. citizenship

State legislatures play a vital role in addressing issues directly affecting residents, including education, health care, public safety and infrastructure. Like Congress, they serve as a critical check on executive authority within their level of government.

 Learn more at
NCSL.org



HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

Legislation is introduced according to the rules of the legislative body. This document relies heavily on the Congressional model, though state legislatures and legislation operate substantively similar.

In the U.S. House of Representatives, legislation is handed to the Clerk of the House or placed in the hopper. In the U.S. Senate, members must gain recognition of the presiding officer to announce the introduction of a bill during the morning hour. If any Senator objects, the introduction of the bill is postponed until the next day.

Once introduced, the bill is assigned a number and labeled with the sponsor's name. In Congress, bills are then sent to the Government Printing Office (GPO) and copies are made. U.S. Senate bills can be jointly sponsored and members can cosponsor the piece of legislation.

Committee referral

After a bill is introduced, it needs to be referred to a committee for further study. In Congress, the bill is referred to the appropriate committee by the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives or the presiding officer in the U.S. Senate. Most often, the actual referral decision is made by the parliamentarian. Bills may be referred to more than one committee and may be split so that parts are sent to different committees. The Speaker of the House may set time limits on committees. Bills are placed on the calendar of the committee to which they have been assigned. Failure to act on a bill is equivalent to killing the legislation. Bills in the U.S. House of Representatives can only be released from committee without a proper committee vote by a discharge petition signed by a majority of the House membership.

Committee process

Once in a committee, comments about the bill's merit are requested by government agencies. A bill can be assigned to subcommittees by the Chairman, who then report their findings to the full committee. Hearings may be held as a part



of this process. A committee will hold a "mark-up" session during which it will make revisions and additions to the proposed legislation. If substantial amendments are made, the committee can order the introduction of a "clean bill," which will include the proposed amendments. This bill may have a new number and will be sent to the floor while the old bill is discarded. The chamber must approve, change or reject all committee amendments before conducting a final passage vote.

After the bill is reported, the committee staff prepares a written report explaining why they favor the bill and why they wish to see their amendments, if any, adopted. Committee members who oppose a bill sometimes write a dissenting opinion in the report. The report is sent back to the whole chamber and is placed on the calendar.

In the U.S. House of Representatives, most bills go to the Rules Committee before reaching the floor. The Committee adopts rules that will govern the procedures under which the bill will be considered by the House. A "closed rule" sets strict time limits on debate and forbids the introduction of amendments. These rules can have a major impact on whether the bill passes.

The Rules Committee can be bypassed in three ways:

- Members can move rules to be suspended, which requires a two-thirds majority vote.
- A discharge petition can be filed.
- The U.S. House of Representatives can use a Calendar Wednesday procedure.

Floor action

Legislation is placed on the Calendar for consideration by the full chamber.

U.S. House of Representatives

Bills are placed on one of four House Calendars. They are usually placed on the calendars in the order in which they are reported, yet they do not usually come to floor in this order. Some bills never reach the floor at all. The Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader decide what will reach the floor and when. Legislation can also be brought to the floor by a discharge petition.

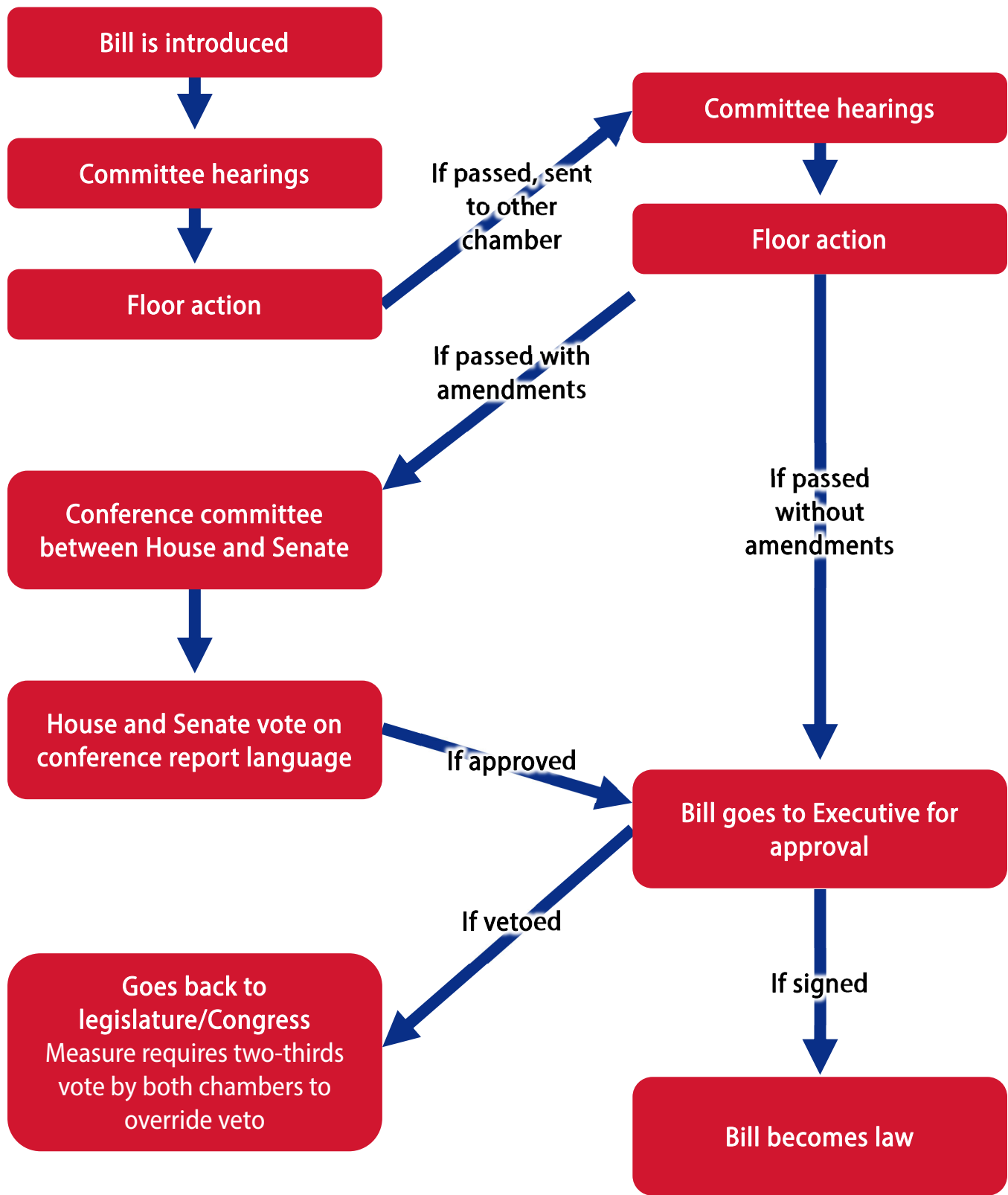
U.S. Senate

Legislation is placed on the Legislative Calendar. There is also an Executive Calendar to deal with treaties and nominations. Scheduling of legislation is the job of the Majority Leader. Bills can be brought to the floor whenever a majority of the Senate chooses.

The legislative process

On paper, bills take a specified path through the legislature to become enacted, which is specified below. In actuality, the

path to enactment can greatly diverge based on strategy and political maneuvering.



Debate

U.S. House of Representatives

Debate is limited by the rules formulated in the Rules Committee. Congress debates and amends the bill but cannot technically pass it. Debate is guided by the Sponsoring Committee and time is divided equally between proponents and opponents. The Committee decides how much time to allot to each person. Amendments must be germane to the subject of a bill - no riders are allowed. The bill is reported back to the House and is voted on. A quorum call is called to make sure that there are enough members present to have a final vote. If there is not a quorum, the House will adjourn or will send the Sergeant at Arms out to round up missing members.

U.S. Senate

Debate is unlimited unless cloture is invoked. Members can speak as long as they want and amendments need not be germane – riders are often offered. Entire bills can therefore be offered as amendments to other bills. Unless cloture is invoked, which requires a vote by three-fifths of the chamber, Senators can use a filibuster to defeat a measure by "talking it to death."

Vote

The bill is voted on. If passed, it is then sent to the other chamber unless that chamber already has a similar measure under consideration. If either chamber does not pass the bill then it dies. In Congress, if the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate pass the same bill, then it is sent to the president. If the House and Senate pass different bills they are sent to Conference Committee, or one chamber agrees to pass the other chamber's version. Most major legislation goes to a Conference Committee.

Conference committee

Members from each house form a conference committee and meet to work out the differences. The committee is usually made up of senior members who are appointed by the presiding officers of the committee that originally dealt with the bill. The representatives from each house work to maintain their version of the bill. If the conference committee reaches a compromise, it prepares a written conference report, which is submitted to each chamber. The conference report must be approved by both the House and the Senate.

Executive action

The bill is sent to the president or governor for review. At the federal level, a bill becomes law if signed by the president. Alternatively, a bill can become law if not signed within ten days and Congress is in session. If Congress adjourns before the ten days and the president has not signed the bill then it does not become law – something known as a "pocket veto." If the president vetoes the bill, it is sent back to Congress with a note listing his/her reasons. The chamber that originated the legislation can attempt to override the veto by a vote of two-thirds of those present.

The bill becomes a law

Once a bill is signed by the executive, or a veto is overridden by both houses, it becomes a law and is assigned an official number.





State nuances

Procedural variances

State legislatures often have distinct rules and procedures that shape how a bill becomes law, which can differ significantly from the federal process. After passing both chambers, a bill is typically sent to the governor for approval or veto. In many states, if the governor takes no action within a specified period, the bill automatically becomes law without the governor's signature – sometimes called a "pocket passage." Legislative deadlines play a critical role in this process. States set strict timelines for introducing bills, committee reviews and floor votes to ensure legislation is considered within limited session periods. Missing these deadlines can halt a bill's progress, creating pressure for timely action. Additionally, some states impose a final adjournment deadline, after which no further legislative business can take place. These deadlines, combined with state-specific procedural rules, highlight the varied ways state legislatures control the pace and flow of lawmaking.

Limited focus sessions

Some state legislatures hold sessions limited to specific issues, often focusing exclusively on budget matters or particular policy topics. These specialized sessions, held annually or biennially, address urgent financial concerns such as setting the state budget, adjusting taxes, or managing appropriations. Others may focus on subjects like redistricting, emergency response, or education reform. By narrowing the agenda, legislatures concentrate resources and attention on pressing priorities without the distractions of a full legislative workload. This approach is especially useful in states with part-time legislatures and helps ensure critical issues receive timely consideration within set deadlines.

Stopping the clock

At the state level, lawmakers sometimes use tactics known as "stopping the clock" to circumvent legislative deadlines or procedural rules. This informal practice involves temporarily halting or suspending the official session clock – sometimes literally by covering or stopping a visible clock – to extend debate, voting, or negotiations beyond the allotted time. Though not always codified in formal rules, stopping the clock allows legislators to complete essential business without technically violating session limits. It can be used to finalize last-minute deals, pass urgent bills, or avoid automatic adjournment. While sometimes controversial, this tactic reflects the flexibility many state legislatures have to balance strict deadlines with the practical need to complete critical work.



Learn more at
NCSL.org

ELECTIONS

Kinds of elections

- **General election** – An election to fill public offices.
- **Primary election** – An election prior to the general election in which voters select the candidates who will run on each party's ticket. Primaries are also used to choose convention delegates and party leaders and may be open or closed.
- **Open primary** – An election that permits voters to choose on Election Day the party primary in which they wish to vote. They may vote for candidates of only one party. A blanket or "free love" primary is a type of open primary. In the voting booth you mark a ballot that lists the candidates for nomination of all the parties and thus you can help select the Democratic candidate for one office and the Republican candidate for another.
- **Closed primary** – The selection of a party's candidates in an election limited to registered party members. Prevents members of other parties from "crossing over" to influence the nomination of an opposing party's candidate.
- **Runoff primary** – If no candidate gets a majority of the votes, a runoff is held to decide who should win.
- **Presidential primary** – A primary used to pick delegates to the presidential nominating conventions of the major parties.
- **Special election** – An election held to fill a vacant seat. These elections are typically held outside the normal timeframes of other elections for the seat.

Registration and eligibility

Participation in elections begins with voter registration. In the United States, registration is managed at the state level and each state sets its own rules within the boundaries of federal law. Most states require eligible voters to register in advance, although some offer same-day registration.

To register, individuals generally must be U.S. citizens, at least 18 years old on or before Election Day and meet any applicable residency requirements. Some states allow 16- or 17-year-olds to pre-register. Rules regarding individuals with felony convictions vary by state. Voter registration can often be completed online, by mail or in person at designated offices. Once registered, voters must keep their information current to avoid issues at the polls.

Political parties

Political parties play a major role in the U.S. electoral process. While not mentioned in the Constitution, they have become central to organizing elections, shaping public debate and nominating candidates. The two dominant parties are the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, although smaller parties, sometimes called third parties, also participate. Parties recruit and support candidates, fundraise, develop policy platforms and mobilize voters. They help coordinate political messaging and provide voters with general guidance on where candidates stand on major issues. At the local, state and national levels, party organizations influence which candidates appear on ballots and how campaigns are run.



Electoral systems

The U.S. uses a range of electoral systems to select public officials. While federal elections follow nationwide standards for timing and eligibility, states control most of the election process, including the design of ballots, voting methods and voting technology.

At the federal level, members of the House of Representatives are elected from single-member districts using a first-past-the-post system, meaning the candidate with the most votes wins. Senators are elected statewide. Presidential elections use the Electoral College system, where each state has a set number of electors based on its congressional representation. Most states use a winner-take-all approach, awarding all electors to the candidate who receives the most votes in that state.

For example, in California, voters use a “top-two” open primary for most state and federal offices (excluding presidential primaries). All candidates – regardless of party – appear on a single ballot. The two individuals with the highest vote totals advance to the November general election, even if both are from the same party. Notably, even if one candidate receives over 50 percent in the primary, a second-place finisher still moves on.

Meanwhile Louisiana employs a “jungle primary” (a nonpartisan blanket majority primary) on general election day. All candidates from all parties appear on the ballot. If someone wins over 50 percent in that round, they are elected outright. If not, the top two vote-getters – regardless of party – advance to

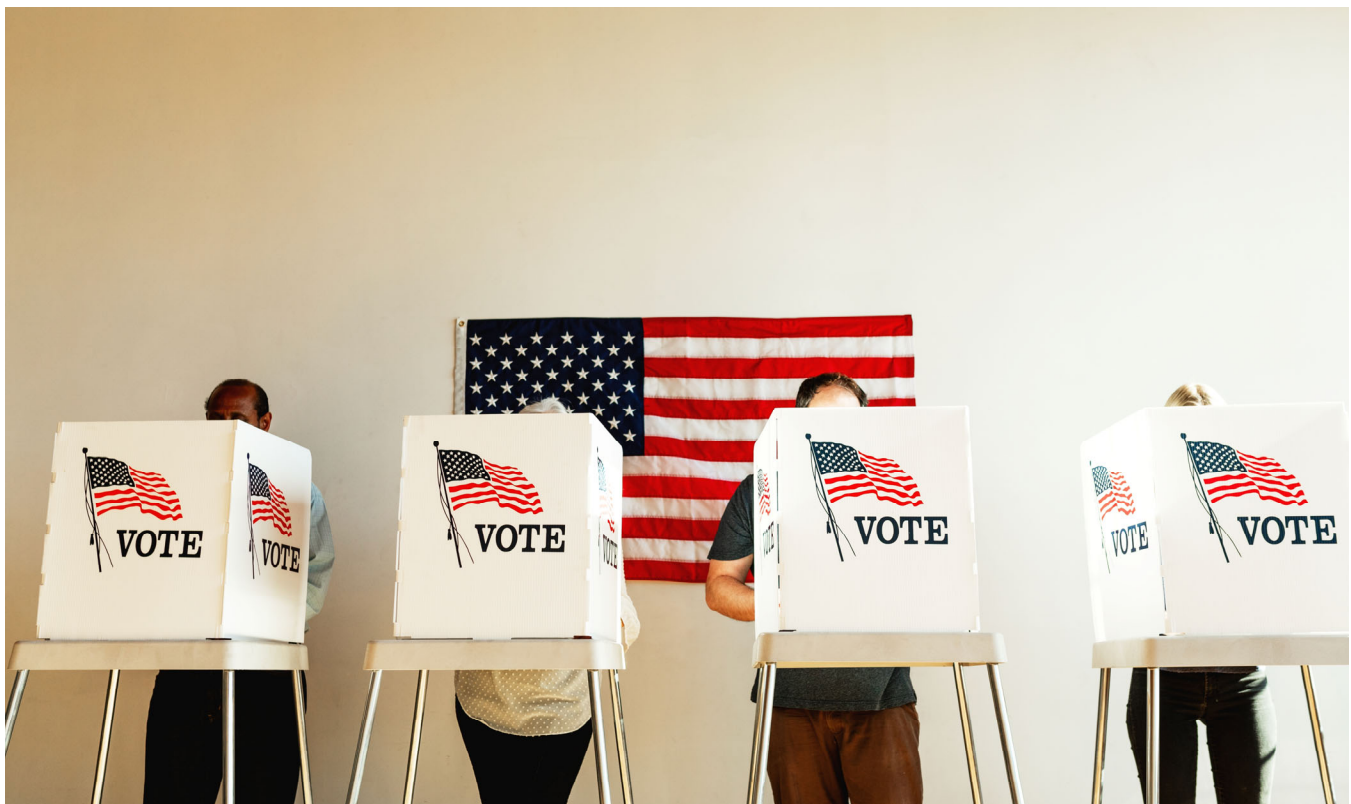
a runoff held roughly a month later. Unlike California’s system, Louisiana allows an outright win in the first round and can result in no separate primary elections.

States also hold elections for governors, legislatures, judges and local officials. These races may follow different rules, including nonpartisan formats or runoffs if no candidate receives a majority. Ballot measures and referenda, which allow voters to approve or reject proposed laws or constitutional amendments, are also common at the state level.

Despite variations across the country, elections are held at regular intervals and are managed to ensure access, accuracy and transparency in the democratic process.

Term limits

Term limits for elected officials vary widely across states and offices. Some states impose strict limits on the number of terms a governor, state legislator or local official may serve, while others have no term limits at all. The length of terms can also differ, with some state legislators serving two-year terms and others four years. Term limits aim to promote fresh ideas and prevent entrenched incumbency, but critics argue they can reduce experience and institutional knowledge. Additionally, some states allow officials to serve nonconsecutive terms, meaning they must step down for a period before running again. These variations reflect the diverse approaches states take to balance continuity, accountability and political renewal.



CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Campaign finance refers to the process of raising and spending money to support candidates, political committees and other efforts related to elections. Understanding how campaign finance works helps clarify how candidates build support, reach voters and comply with laws that promote transparency and accountability.

Campaign funding

Campaigns rely on financial contributions from various sources to operate and communicate with voters. At the federal level, individual contributions make up a significant portion of campaign funding.

Common sources of funding

- **Individual contributions** – Personal donations made directly to candidates or political committees.
- **Political Action Committees (PACs)** – Groups that pool contributions from members to support candidates or causes.
- **Independent expenditures** – Spending by individuals or groups that supports or opposes candidates without coordinating with a campaign.



Political Action Committees (PACs)

PACs play a central role in campaign finance. They are formed to support candidates or issues that align with a group's mission.

Types of PACs

- **Traditional PACs** – Can contribute directly to candidates within legal limits.
- **Super PACs** – May raise and spend unlimited amounts but cannot donate directly to candidates or coordinate with campaigns.
- **Professional associations** – Many, including AAOMS, operate PACs that support candidates who understand and support the profession's priorities.

 Learn more at OMSPAC.org

Contribution limits

Federal and state laws set limits on how much individuals and PACs can contribute.

Federal level (2025-26 cycle)

- Individuals may give up to \$3,300 per election to a candidate committee.
- Contributions to traditional PACs are limited to \$5,000 per year.
- Super PACs and independent groups may accept unlimited contributions but must operate independently from campaigns.

State level

- Vary by state and may differ significantly from federal rules.
- States may also regulate contributions to local and judicial candidates.

Legal requirements and oversight

Campaign finance is governed by federal and state laws to ensure transparency and prevent undue influence.

- **Federal oversight** – The Federal Election Commission (FEC) enforces federal laws and publishes campaign finance data.
- **State oversight** – State election offices or ethics commissions handle campaign finance at the state and local levels.
- **Disclosure rules** – Most contributions and expenditures must be publicly reported, allowing voters to see who is funding political activity.
- **Giving restrictions** – Contributions must be made from personal funds. Giving in another person's name or reimbursing contributions is prohibited.

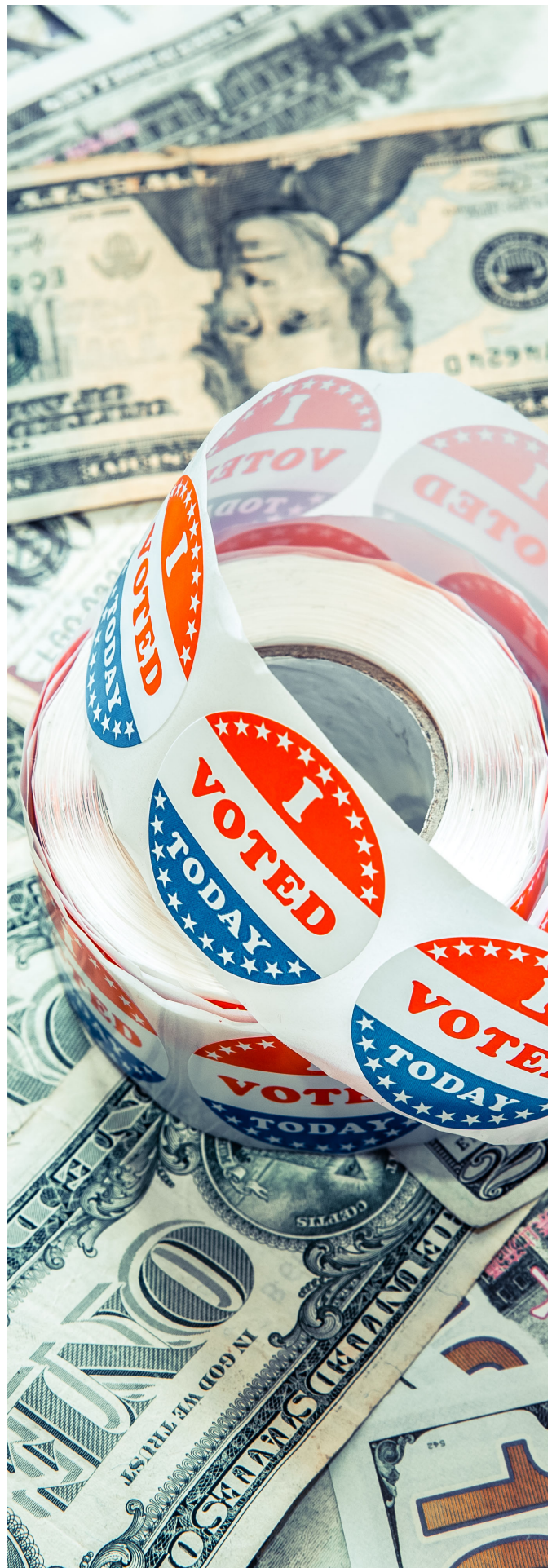
 Learn more at
[FEC.gov](https://www.fec.gov)

Finding campaign finance information

Anyone can look up campaign finance records to see where candidates receive support and how they spend funds. Helpful tools include:

- **FEC.gov** – For federal campaign finance reports.
- **State election board websites** – For state and local campaign filings.
- **OpenSecrets.org** and **FollowTheMoney.org** – For summaries of giving trends and political spending.

Campaign finance laws create a framework for supporting candidates while maintaining public trust in the electoral process. Being informed about this system helps individuals engage in political advocacy effectively and responsibly.



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Grassroots

Historically, the term “grassroots” originated in a speech by Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana to a delegation of the 1912 Bull Moose Convention. Beveridge remarked that theirs was the part of grass roots ... “grown from the soil of the people’s hard necessities.” Today, the term “grassroots” has evolved to mean organized efforts by special interest groups to promote and generate broad support for or against specific issues. Now firmly fixed in the legislative and lobbying dictionaries, it is generally defined as any technique that provides the “folks back home” information designed to stimulate communications by letters, telegrams and personal visits with their constituent members of Congress.

Reaching out to elected officials is a powerful way to influence policy decisions and share the perspective of the OMS community. AAOMS offers several tools to support these efforts, including VoterVoice for sending messages directly to lawmakers, targeted grassroots campaigns on priority issues and the OMS Action Network, which provides updates and opportunities to engage. These resources make it easier to stay informed and take timely, effective action.



Learn more at
AAOMS.org/Action



Voting

Voting is one of the most direct and impactful ways to participate in the democratic process. It gives individuals the opportunity to choose leaders, influence policies and shape the future of their communities. Local, state and federal elections determine decisions that affect public education, healthcare, infrastructure, taxes and civil rights.

Participation in elections also sends a message to elected officials about the priorities of the public. High voter turnout can increase accountability and legitimacy in governance. Even in races where outcomes seem certain, every vote contributes to the broader direction of public policy and community values.

While voting is a right, it is also a civic responsibility. Informed participation ensures that the system reflects a diverse range of voices and experiences. Choosing not to vote means giving up a key opportunity to be heard in decisions that affect daily life.

Resources and tools

Several resources are available to support informed and accessible participation in elections and civic life:

- **State and local election offices** – Official websites provide information on how to register, check registration status, view sample ballots and find polling locations.
- **Vote.gov** – A nonpartisan federal site offering voter registration guidance by state.
- **Ballot Ready and Ballotpedia** – Tools to look up personalized ballots, candidate positions and referenda.
- **Local League of Women Voters chapters** – Offer nonpartisan voter guides, debates and public forums.
- **Congress.gov and state legislature websites** – Useful for tracking legislation, committee actions and elected officials.
- **Public libraries** – Often host voter registration drives, information sessions and access to reliable election materials.

Using trusted and accurate sources is essential when preparing to vote or engage with policy. These tools make it easier to stay informed, understand the stakes of an election and take meaningful action in a complex political environment.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Act – A bill passed by the legislature and approved by the executive.

Adjournment – Termination of a session or meeting for that day with the hour and day of the next meeting being set prior to adjournment.

Adoption – Approval of a motion, amendment or resolution.

Amendment – Formal wording changing the language of a bill.

Astroturfing – A coordinated effort designed to appear as grassroots support, often organized by political groups or special interests behind the scenes.

Ballot fatigue – When voters stop completing their ballots partway through, often skipping lower-profile or down-ballot races.

Ballot initiative – A process that allows citizens to propose new laws or constitutional amendments and place them on the ballot for a public vote.

Ballot proposition – A general term for any measure placed on a ballot, including initiatives, referenda or amendments, for voters to approve or reject.

Bicameral – A legislative body composed of two chambers. Congress and most state legislatures are bicameral.

Bills – A legislative proposal that if passed by both chambers of the legislature or Congress – and approved by the president or governor – becomes law. Each bill is assigned a bill number. In Congress, HR denotes bills that originate in the U.S. House of Representatives and S denotes bills that originate in the U.S. Senate.

Block grant – Federal funding given to state or local governments for broad purposes, allowing flexibility in how the money is spent.

Calendar Wednesday – A procedure in the U.S. House of Representatives during which each standing committees may bring up for consideration any bill that has been reported on the floor on or before the previous day. The procedure also limits debate for each subject matter to two hours.

Carry over – A phrase meaning a bill failed to be enacted during the first year of a two year legislative session but retains its status when the legislature convenes in the second year of the session.

Caucus – A group of legislators with similar interests (i.e. issue or political party).

Chilling effect – The discouragement of lawful speech or action due to fear of legal or political consequences.

Citizen legislature – A part-time legislative body where members typically hold other jobs outside their lawmaking duties and meet for limited sessions.

Cloture – A motion generally used in the U.S. Senate to end a filibuster. Invoking cloture requires a vote by three-fifths of the full Senate. If cloture is invoked, further debate is limited to 30 hours, provided it is not a vote on the passage of the piece of legislation.

Co-sponsor – A member or members that add his or her name formally in support of another member's bill. In the U.S. House of Representatives, a member can become a co-sponsor of a bill at any point up to the time of consideration by the last authorized committee. In the U.S. Senate, a member can become a co-sponsor of a bill anytime before the vote takes place on the bill. However, a co-sponsor is not required.

Coattail effect – The influence a popular candidate at the top of the ballot has in helping other candidates from the same party win lower-level races.

Committee of the Whole – A committee including all members of the U.S. House of Representatives. It allows bills and resolutions to be considered without adhering to all the formal rules of a House session, such as needing a quorum. All measures on the Union Calendar must be considered first by the Committee of the Whole.

Concurrence – Approval by the house of origin to changes made in the second chamber.

Concurrent resolutions – A type of legislation – designated in Congress by H Con Res or S Con Res – that is often used to express the sense of both chambers, to set annual budget or to fix adjournment dates. Concurrent resolutions are not signed by the president or governor and therefore do not hold the weight of law.

Corrections calendar – A list of bills selected by the Speaker of the House, in consultation with the Minority Leader, that will be considered in the U.S. House of Representatives and debated for one hour. Generally bills are selected because they focus on changing laws, rules and regulations that are judged to be outdated or unnecessary. A three-fifths majority of those present and voting is required to pass bills on the Corrections Calendar.

Council of state – A group of elected executive officials in some states who operate independently of the governor and oversee specific state functions.

Dark money – Political spending by organizations that are not required to disclose their donors, often used to influence elections or public opinion.

Discharge petition – A petition that if signed by a majority of the U.S. House of Representatives requires a bill to come out of a committee and be moved to the floor of the House.

Electoral College – A group of persons called "electors," selected by the voters in each state that officially elects the president and vice president. The number of electors in each state is equal to its number of representatives in both chambers of Congress.

Engross – The incorporation of adopted amendments into the text of a bill.

Filibuster – An informal term for extended debate or other procedures used to prevent a vote on a bill in the U.S. Senate.

Fusion voting – An election system that allows multiple political parties to endorse the same candidate, who then appears on the ballot under each party's line.

Germane – Relevant to the bill or business either chamber is addressing. The U.S. House of Representatives requires an amendment to meet a standard of relevance, being germane unless a special rule has been passed.

Gerrymandering – The manipulation of electoral district boundaries to benefit a particular political party or group.

GOTV (Get out the Vote) – Efforts aimed at increasing voter turnout, especially through outreach, reminders and transportation assistance.

Hijack – More commonly found at the state level, an action to delete the contents of a bill and insert entirely new provisions.

Home rule – Authority granted by a state to a local government to govern itself and manage local affairs without direct state interference.

Hopper – Box on the desk of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives where members deposit bills and resolutions for introduction.

House Calendar – A list of all the public bills that do not address money and maybe considered by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Initiative – An electoral procedure whereby citizens can propose legislation or constitutional amendments and refer the decision to a popular vote by obtaining the required number of signatures on a petition.

Interim – The time interval between legislative session.

Joint resolutions – A type of legislation – in Congress, designated by HJ Res or S J Res – that is treated the same as a bill unless it proposes an amendment to the Constitution. In this case, two-thirds majority of those present and voting in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate and ratification of the states, are required for the Constitutional amendment to be adopted.

Logrolling – The practice of lawmakers trading votes to gain support for their respective proposals or bills.

Machine – A hierarchically organized, centrally led state or local party organization that rewards members with material benefits.

Markup – A meeting where a legislative committee reviews, amends and votes on proposed legislation before it moves forward.

Morning hour – A 90-minute period on Mondays and Tuesdays in the U.S. House of Representatives set aside for five-minute speeches by members who have reserved a spot in advance on any topic.

Motion to recommit – A motion that requests a bill be sent back to committee for further consideration. Normally, the motion is accompanied by instructions concerning what the committee should change in the legislation or general instructions such as that the committee should hold further hearings.

Motion to table – A motion that is not debatable and that can be made by any legislator on any pending question. Agreement to the motion is equivalent to defeating the question tabled.

October surprise – A major, unexpected news event or political development occurring shortly before an election that may influence its outcome.

Office-block ballot – A ballot listing all candidates for a given office under the name of that office; also called a "Massachusetts" ballot.

Party-column ballot – A ballot listing all candidates of a given party together under the name of that party; also called an "Indiana" ballot.

Private Calendar – A list of all the private bills that are to be considered by the U.S. House of Representatives. It is called on the first and third Tuesday of every month.

Pocket veto – When the president or a governor takes no action on a bill and the legislative session ends, effectively preventing the bill from becoming law without a formal veto.

Point of order – A formal objection raised during a meeting or legislative session to question whether rules or procedures are being followed correctly.

Pork barrel spending – Government funding directed toward specific local projects, often to benefit a legislator's district rather than serve a broader national interest.

Prefiled legislation – A bill submitted for consideration before the official start of a legislative session.

Private bill – A bill that is introduced on behalf of a specific individual that if it is enacted into law only affects the specific person or organization the bill concerns. Often, private bills address immigration or naturalization issues.

Professional legislature – A full-time legislative body with longer sessions, larger staffs and higher compensation, where serving as a lawmaker is typically a full-time job.

Pro forma session – A brief meeting of a legislative body held without conducting official business, often used to fulfill constitutional requirements or prevent recess appointments.

Public bill – A bill that affects the general public if enacted into law.

Quorum – The number of officials that must be present before business can begin. In the U.S. House of Representatives, 218 members must be present for a quorum. In the U.S. Senate, 51 members must be present, however the Senate can conduct daily business without a quorum unless it is challenged by a point of order.

Recall election – A direct vote allowing citizens to remove an elected official from office before their term ends, typically via petition followed by a referendum.

Recess – A temporary pause or delay in the legislature's affairs. Recesses are usually called around holidays or elections.

Reconciliation – A special legislative process in Congress used to expedite budget-related bills, allowing them to pass the Senate with a simple majority and bypass a filibuster.

Regulations – Rules of law made by agencies of the executive branch to carry out a legislative or administrative mandate. Regulations are typically enacted to provide greater specificity to statutes.

Rider – An informal term for an amendment or provision that is not relevant to the legislation where it is attached.

Roll call – A vote where each legislator's name is read in alphabetical order and votes are given.

Score – Estimated budgetary impact of proposed legislation.

Sine die – The final adjournment of the legislature for the legislative session. Any legislation still pending after Sine Die is considered dead and must be reintroduced during the next legislative session for any further consideration.

Simple resolution – A type of legislation – designated by H Res or S Res – that is used primarily to express the sense of the chamber where it is introduced or passed. It only has the force of the chamber passing the resolution. A simple resolution is not signed by the president and cannot become public law.

Split-ticket voting – Voting for candidates of different parties for various offices in the same election. For example, voting for a Republican for senator and a Democrat for president.

Spoiler candidate – A minor or inconsequential candidate whose presence in an election draws votes away from a major candidate, potentially altering the overall outcome.

Sponsor – The original member who introduces a bill.

States rights – A political principle asserting that state governments hold powers not explicitly delegated to the federal government, often grounded in the Tenth Amendment.

Statutes – Provisions of law enacted via legislation.

Stop the clock – A procedural tactic used in some legislative bodies to allow continued action on bills or other matters after a session's official deadline has passed.

Straight-ticket voting – Voting candidates who are all of the same party. For example, voting for Republican candidates for senator, representative and president.

Substitute amendment – An amendment that would replace existing language of a bill or another amendment with its own.

Sunset provision – A clause in a law that sets an expiration date, causing the law or specific measures to lapse unless renewed by the legislature.

Sunshine law – Legislation that requires government agencies to hold open meetings and provide public access to records, promoting transparency and accountability.

Supermajority – A voting threshold higher than a simple majority (often two-thirds or three-fifths) required to pass certain decisions like constitutional amendment.

Suspense file – Typically found in state legislatures, any bill costing the state more than a specified sum of money may be placed in this file. After adoption of the state budget, suspense file bills are enacted as state resources permit.

Suspension of the rules – A procedure in the U.S. House of Representatives that limits debate on a bill to 40 minutes, bars amendments to the legislation and requires a two-thirds majority of those present and voting for the measure to be passed.

Unfunded mandate – A requirement imposed by a higher level of government (usually federal) on lower levels without providing corresponding funding, forcing them to shoulder the financial burden.

Unicameral – A legislative body composed of one chamber. The Nebraska legislature is a unicameral body.

Union calendar – A list of all bills that address money and may be considered by the House of Representatives. Generally bills contained in the Union Calendar can be categorized as appropriations bills or bills raising revenue.

Veto – A power that allows the president, a governor or a mayor to refuse approval of a piece of legislation. Federally, the president returns a vetoed bill to the Congress, generally with a message. Congress can accept the veto or attempt to override the veto by a two-thirds majority of those present and voting in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate.



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