

The Legislative Branch

A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book
Word Count: 1,492

LEVELED BOOK • W

The Legislative Branch

Connections

Writing

Imagine that you are running for Congress. Write a speech describing what you would do to help the people you represent. Present the speech to your class.

Social Studies

Create a poster showing how a bill becomes a law. Display your poster in your classroom.

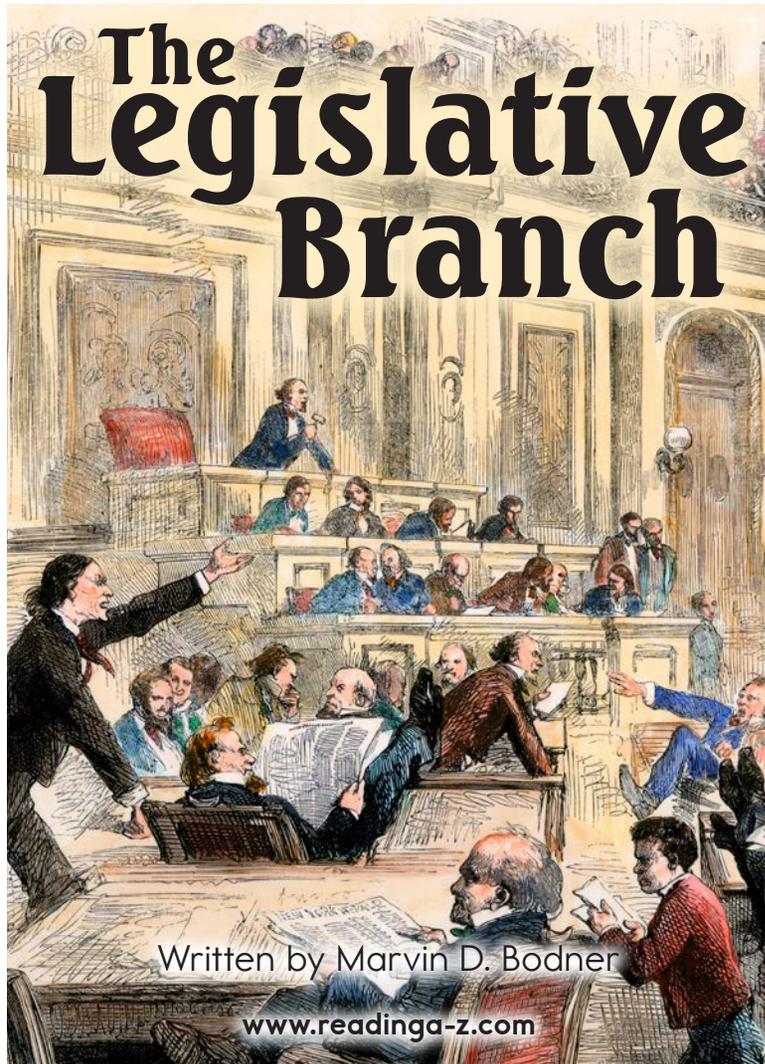
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Focus Question

What is the legislative branch of the United States government, and what are some things members of this branch do?

Words to Know

amending	override
committees	permanent
debates	recommend
fund-raising	research
House of Representatives	Senate
legislative	sponsor

Front cover: The Capitol Building is the workplace of senators and representatives as well as an art and history museum.

Title page: In this artwork, representatives debate in the House during the early 1860s.

Page 3: Volunteers support election campaigns of senators and representatives.

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Correlation

LEVEL W

Fountas & Pinnell	S
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40



Table of Contents

The U.S. Congress	4
How the Constitution Organizes the U.S. Government	5
How Congress Works	6
How a Bill Becomes a Law	9
What Members of Congress Do	12
<i>Committees</i>	12
<i>Speeches</i>	12
<i>Getting Elected</i>	13
<i>Voting</i>	13
How Power Is Shared in the U.S. Government	14
The Responsibility of Congress	15
Glossary	16

The U.S. Congress

In the summer of 1964, members of the United States Congress were discussing a new law. The Civil Rights Act would allow people of color to use the same schools, libraries, restaurants, and swimming pools as white people.



Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia gave a long speech trying to block the Civil Rights Act.

The act had already passed the **House of Representatives**, but it still had to pass the other half of Congress—the **Senate**. However, a group of senators were making long speeches on the Senate floor. They were trying to prevent a vote from taking place. One senator talked for fourteen hours and thirteen minutes. Soon after that speech, the Senate finally passed the Civil Rights Act. President Lyndon Johnson later signed it into law.

Passing this act is only one example of how the U.S. Congress works. Made up of members of the Senate and the House of Representatives, Congress is the central body of the **legislative** branch. Members of both parts of Congress represent U.S. citizens. They are responsible for writing and **amending** the laws of the country. They also have other important duties.

How the Constitution Organizes the U.S. Government

The Constitution, adopted in 1788, serves as a blueprint for the U.S. government. It divides the government into three parts, or branches. The executive branch, led by the president, manages most government operations and departments. The legislative branch, made up of the Senate and House of Representatives, represents U.S. citizens in government and also makes laws. The judicial branch handles the U.S. system of courts.

At times, the different branches work together. At other times, they disagree with each other.

Article I of the Constitution gives the legislative branch the right to create new laws or change existing ones. It is the only part of the government that can do so. It also gives Congress many other rights and duties.



Since it was adopted, twenty-seven amendments, or changes, have been made to the Constitution.



Thomas Jefferson, the third U.S. president, held a design competition for the Capitol Building in 1792.

How Congress Works

Members of the Senate and the House both work in the Capitol Building. They have different numbers of members.

No matter what a state's size or population is, two senators represent each state. One hundred senators make up the Senate. Senators are elected for a term of six years.

The Senate must approve certain positions that the president appoints people to, such as Supreme Court judges. The Senate also approves treaties with other countries.

The House of Representatives is based on population. It has 435 members, each elected to a two-year term. Members of the House are divided among the fifty states according to each state's total population. With the largest population in the United States, California has the most representatives in the House. States with smaller populations, such as Delaware, only have one representative.



Representative Lisa Blunt Rochester is the only representative from Delaware.



A man asks his representative a question at a town hall meeting in Oregon.

The members of the House of Representatives elect their leader, known as the Speaker of the House. If the president and vice president couldn't perform their duties, the Speaker of the House would take over the presidency. This makes the Speaker a powerful position in government.

If citizens have problems with how the country is being run, they can get in touch with their representative. The public can also attend town hall meetings led by politicians. At these meetings, people can discuss government matters openly with their representatives.

How to Become a Senator or Representative

To serve in the Senate, people must be at least thirty years old. They must have been U.S. citizens for the last nine years and live in the state they wish to represent. Those wanting to win a seat in the House must be at least twenty-five years old. They must have been U.S. citizens for a minimum of seven years and live in the state they want to represent.

How a Bill Becomes a Law

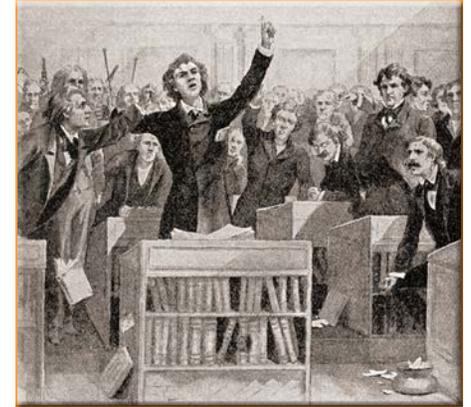
Creating a new law requires many steps. The first step is to write the bill. Anyone can do this, even members of the public.

Next, a member of Congress must present the bill as its **sponsor** before the Senate, the House, or both. The bill then goes before one or more **committees** in either the Senate or House for review. Committee members **research** the bill, decide which laws should be reviewed, and **recommend** what to do next. Committees hold hearings during which they ask experts about the bill and try to find solutions to any problems.



A scientist speaks at a committee hearing in the Senate.

Then the bill goes to a subcommittee for review. Subcommittees research the bill more. Next, they hold a hearing and a vote. If the majority of the subcommittee votes to recommend the bill, it goes back to the full committee for a hearing and vote.



Members of Congress participate in a heated debate about slavery in this illustration from 1850.

If the majority of the full committee does not vote to recommend it, discussion of the bill

stops. Members of Congress can and often do reintroduce bills many times. If the majority of the full committee supports the bill, it is placed on the official calendar of either the Senate or the House. Important bills get decided upon right away. Others may wait for months. Many never get considered at all.

Dead Bills

A term of Congress lasts for two years. Once the term ends, any bills that didn't pass during that period are considered dead. This includes bills that were passed by either the Senate or the House but not both, and even those passed by both but not signed by the president.

Math Minute

Most proposed bills never become laws. From January 2011 to January 2013, Congress introduced 6,845 bills. Only 561 of these bills passed and became laws. How many did not become law?

Answer: 6,284

When a bill's date arrives, either the Senate or the House **debates** the bill. At this point, they can change it. Then the Senate or the House votes on the bill. If a majority approves the bill, it moves to the other branch of Congress. It is once again debated and changed.

After the majority of both houses vote to approve the bill, it goes straight to the president's desk. The president can sign the bill, in which case it becomes a law. The other way the bill becomes a law is for the president to allow ten days to pass. Then it automatically becomes law. The president can also veto, or reject, the bill. In this case, the bill gets sent back to Congress. A bill can still become law without the president's approval if two-thirds of both the Senate and the House vote to **override** the veto.

What Members of Congress Do

Members of Congress typically have very busy schedules. Here is a glimpse into some parts of their work.

Committees

Senators and members of the House are assigned to committees and subcommittees. **Permanent** committees in Congress, such as those dedicated to education and the workforce, agriculture, and the budget, are called *standing committees*. Other committees investigate a specific problem for a certain amount of time. Committees form subcommittees to take care of certain tasks.

Speeches

Senators can talk about a bill for as long as they like unless a time limit has been set. Often only a few senators are actually on the Senate floor to discuss a bill. Other senators are busy working on committees or in their offices. When a bell rings, senators go to the floor to vote.

Because there are so many more representatives than senators, certain rules limit the amount of time they can speak about a bill as well as how many changes they can make to a bill.

Getting Elected

Members of Congress spend a lot of their time campaigning and **fund-raising**. Since representatives are elected every two years, fund-raising is very important for them to keep their jobs. In election years, representatives might spend four hours a day fund-raising. They need money for advertisements, travel, posters, stickers, and stamps. Through phone calls, speeches, and interviews, members of Congress try to win votes by talking about what they have done and plan to do to help the people they represent.



At a 2018 rally, a senator introduces Representative Ayanna Pressley from Massachusetts.

Voting

Members of Congress must be physically present in the Capitol Building to vote. Representatives vote by putting a card into a machine at one of forty-seven voting stations located throughout the House.

Senators have three options for voting. In a roll call vote, senators vote aloud after a clerk calls their name. In a voice vote, senators vote aloud together; exact numbers are not counted. In a division or standing vote, individual votes in a voice vote are counted.

How Power Is Shared in the U.S. Government

The framers of the Constitution did not want the legislative, executive, and judicial branches to abuse their power. A system of checks and balances in the Constitution ensures that power is distributed fairly among the three branches.

The legislative branch checks the executive branch by approving people the president chooses for certain positions and treaties made by the president. The legislative branch checks the judicial branch by approving the president's choices of judges. In addition, Congress checks the judicial branch by proposing amendments to the Constitution that would overturn judicial decisions.

The other two branches can also check the legislative branch. The presidential veto is an example of the executive branch's check on the legislative branch. Even after the majority of Congress has accepted a bill, the president can prevent it from becoming law. However, to maintain a balance of power, Congress can vote to override a presidential veto if two-thirds of each house votes to accept the bill. The judicial branch checks the legislative branch when the Supreme Court overturns a law passed by Congress and the president because the court decides it is unconstitutional.

The Responsibility of Congress

A statue called *Freedom* stands on top of the dome of the Capitol Building, where the Senate and the House of Representatives meet. The female figure wears a helmet and holds a sword and a laurel wreath. She wants peace, but she is ready to fight to protect her country's freedom.

Freedom reminds the politicians representing the American people what the United States stands for.

With the power to write and change laws, the legislative branch is an important part of the United States government. Senators and representatives make sure that all citizens have a voice and are fairly represented in their government.



Freedom is made of bronze and weighs around 15,000 pounds (6,804 kg).

Glossary

amending (<i>v.</i>)	making a change to improve something (p. 4)
committees (<i>n.</i>)	groups of people who consider or decide on a course of action (p. 9)
debates (<i>v.</i>)	discusses an important subject at length and in detail (p. 11)
fund-raising (<i>n.</i>)	the process of collecting money from individuals or groups to support a certain cause or goal (p. 13)
House of Representatives (<i>n.</i>)	one of the two lawmaking houses of the U.S. Congress, containing a number of representatives from each state that is based on population (p. 4)
legislative (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the branch of government that makes laws (p. 4)
override (<i>v.</i>)	to take over, cancel out, or replace another (p. 11)
permanent (<i>adj.</i>)	lasting or meant to last forever; not changing (p. 12)
recommend (<i>v.</i>)	to suggest (p. 9)
research (<i>v.</i>)	to study or investigate, especially to discover new information or to find facts (p. 9)
Senate (<i>n.</i>)	one of the two lawmaking houses of the U.S. Congress, containing two representatives for each state (p. 4)
sponsor (<i>n.</i>)	a person who supports and accepts responsibility for another person, idea, or thing (p. 9)