



# Glossary of Congressional Terms

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## A-D

**Act** – Legislation that has been passed by both houses of Congress and signed by the President or passed over his veto. Such legislation then becomes a law.

**Adjourn** – To end a day’s session in either chamber of Congress. An adjournment Sine Die is the final ending of a session of Congress.

**Allowances** – Amounts inserted into the budget to accommodate additional expenditures.

**Amendment** – A proposal to change the text of a pending bill or another kind of measure.

**Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute** – An amendment that replaces the text of a bill or measure with different text.

**Appropriation** – A part of the law that allows federal agencies to obligate funds (by placing orders or awarding contracts, for example) and then use funds from the Treasury to pay for them.

**Authorization** – A part of the law that allows the continuation or creation of a program or agency and also allows appropriations for such programs.

**Bill** – A legislative proposal or measure. A bill becomes a law when it is passed in both the House and Senate in identical forms. Bills are assigned numbers in the order in which they are introduced in their respective chamber. When introduced in the House, a bill is designated as “H.R.”, and when introduced in the Senate, a bill is designated as “S.”

**Blue Dog Coalition** – The Blue Dog Coalition was formed in 1995 with the goal of representing the center of the political spectrum within the House of Representatives. The Blue Dogs are fiscally

conservative Democrats who are committed to financial stability and national security. In particular, Blue Dogs support legislation that is fully paid for and does not increase the federal deficit.

**Budget Authority** – The ability under the law to obligate federal funds, which become outlays in the future.

**Budget Committee** – A committee in each chamber of Congress that creates the congressional budget.

**Budget Reconciliation** – Once a budget resolution passes, Congress enforces it through a budget reconciliation bill. The reconciliation bill changes existing law in order to meet the spending limits put forth in the budget resolution—it “reconciles” program spending to fit within the levels allowed by a budget resolution.

**Budget Resolution** – A concurrent resolution that sets the congressional budget. A budget resolution does not require the signature of the President, and it may include suggestions for both the House and Senate committees regarding budget reconciliation.

**Byrd Rule** – Named after Senator Robert C. Byrd (D-WV), this rule bans the inclusion of extraneous matter in budget reconciliation bills or measures when considered in the Senate.

**Calendar** – An agenda or listing of pending legislative business.

**Caucus** – An organization of members of the House or the Senate, or both. A caucus discusses topics of shared interest and may also plan policy collectively. Examples include the Children’s Caucus, the Congressional Black, Caucus, or the Progressive Caucus, etc.

**Chamber of Congress** – Congress is divided to two chambers—the House of Representatives and the Senate.

**Christmas Tree Bill** – A bill that has many amendments that are unrelated to the subject of the bill.

**Clerk of the House** – The chief administrative officer of the House of Representatives.

**Cloakrooms** – Small rooms off the House and Senate floors where members may go for informal conferences and phone calls.

**Closed Rule** – A closed rule allows debate on a piece of legislation for a set period of time and controls, often very tightly, what amendments, if any, can be offered.

**Cloture** – The process that ends a filibuster in the Senate. Invoking cloture requires 60 votes.

**Committee of the Whole House** – This structure allows the House to become a “committee” to conduct official business with a quorum of 100 instead of the normally required 218. Debate is limited to the pending bill and is considered by the “committee of the whole.” Once the “committee” has finished reviewing the bill, the bill returns to the House for any further action.

**Concurrent Resolution** – A statement made by Congress, usually to present a sentiment of Congress or to handle administrative business, that is approved by a majority of both the House and Senate. This kind of resolution is not sent to the President for approval.

**Conference Committee** – A special committee that includes key leaders in the Senate and the House who work to resolve differences between versions of a bill that have been passed by the Senate and House.

**Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC)** – Founded in 1994 by then Congressman Norman Mineta (D-CA), CAPAC is made up of 28 members of Congress from both the House and Senate who have a strong interest in promoting Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) issues and advocating for the concerns of AAPIs. CAPAC is non-partisan and has served as a leader in tackling critical issues within the AAPI community.

**Congressional Black Caucus (CBC)** – Founded in 1969, the CBC’s mission is to achieve greater equity for people of African descent. The CBC is made up of 42 African American members of Congress. Although the CBC is officially non-partisan, the caucus has been traditionally been aligned with the Democratic Party.

**Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC)** – The CHC, founded in 1976, is dedicated to voicing and advancing, through the legislative process, issues that affect Hispanics in the United States and Puerto Rico. The caucus serves as a forum where the Hispanic members of Congress can coalesce around a collective legislative agenda. Today, the CHC is organized as a congressional member organization with a total of 24 members, one in the Senate and 23 in the House of Representatives.

**Congressional Record** – The official record of the proceedings of and debates in Congress. It is printed daily.

**Congressional Terms of Office** – In the House of Representatives, the term is two years long. In the Senate, the term is six years long.

**Continuing Appropriation** – A bill that temporarily extends funds for government programs until Congress passes a final appropriation for the program.

**E-M** **Education and Labor Committee** – One of three committees with jurisdiction over health policy in the House of Representatives. The committee has two subcommittees that work on issues that are directly related to health - the Health, Employment, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee (HELP); and the Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee. The committee oversees legislation pertaining to access to health care for working families and worker health and safety.

**Energy and Commerce Committee** – One of three committees with jurisdiction over health policy in the House of Representatives. The committee oversees programs that are authorized under the Social Security Act, including Medicaid, Medicare Part B, and long-term care; as well as programs authorized under the Public Health Service Act, which include hospital construction and biomedical research. The committee has a Subcommittee on Health.

**Engrossed Bill** – A final version of a bill passed by either chamber of Congress.

**Enrolled Bill** – A final version of a bill that is passed by both chambers of Congress in identical forms.

**Executive Session** – A committee meeting of either chamber of Congress that is closed to the public.

**Filibuster** – The process of prolonging debate without limit in the Senate. A “cloture vote” of 60 Senators is required to end it.

**Finance Committee** – The Finance Committee is one of the two committees in the Senate with jurisdiction over health policy legislation. In particular, the Senate Finance Committee has jurisdiction over legislation that affects federal revenues, as well as health coverage programs that were established under the Social Security Act that are financed by a specific tax or trust fund, such as Medicare and Medicaid. It is arguably one of the most powerful committees in Congress.

**Fiscal Year** – For the federal government, the fiscal year runs from October 1 through September 30.

**Germane** – Relating to the underlying “principal” intention of a bill or measure.

**Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee** – The HELP Committee is one of the two committees in the Senate with jurisdiction over health policy legislation. The committee oversees programs that are authorized under the Public Service Act; the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act; and the Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Act. The committee has responsibility for measures relating to education, labor, health, and public welfare. Although the HELP Committee does not have jurisdiction over Medicare or Medicaid, its members hold hearings regarding health coverage expansions and health care cost containment.

**Hearing** – Sessions held by House and Senate committees where various parties present testimony. This testimony is often but not always related to legislation.

**Joint Committee** – A committee that consists of House and Senate members.

**Joint Resolution** – A measure listed as “H. J. Res:” or “S. J. Res:” that creates law when Congress passes it in identical forms in both chambers and the President signs it.

**Majority Leader** – The political party that has majority control in the House or the Senate chooses a spokesperson who also leads the legislative strategies for the party in the Senate. In the House, the Majority Leader assists the Speaker of the House, a leadership position that the majority party also controls.

**Majority Whip** – The assistant to the Majority Leader.

**Marking Up a Bill** – A process in which a committee or subcommittee reviews a bill, debates changes, and formally votes to make changes to the bill by adding amendments.

**M-T** **Minority Leader** – A spokesperson chosen by the minority party to lead the legislative strategies for the party.

**Minority Whip** – The assistant to the minority leader.

**Omnibus Bill** – A bill that consists of several items that are distinct but related.

**Overriding a Veto** – When the President refuses to sign a bill into law, Congress may still pass the bill into law by obtaining a two-thirds vote in both chambers.

**PAYGO (Pay-As-You-Go)** – The rule under which no legislative changes that require new taxes or spending may be added unless they are “paid for.” All such changes have to be paid for by finding offsets—usually new revenue or spending changes.

**President of the Senate** – The leading officer of the Senate, mandated by the Constitution to be the Vice President. When the Vice President is absent (which is the norm), a President Pro tempore is selected to take his place. This is usually the most senior member of the majority party, but the position is sometimes delegated to a very junior member.

**Quorum** – The number of members that must be present in the House or Senate to conduct business. In the Senate, 51 members are needed. In the House, 218 are needed.

**Reconciliation Floor Rules** – Reconciliation legislation requires only 51 votes to pass on the Senate floor, *and* it is filibuster-proof. Controversial legislation can require 60 votes (a super-majority) to pass Congress, rather than a simple majority—otherwise, the minority can block it with a filibuster. Reconciliation can be used as a tool to protect the majority’s legislation from a few in the minority.

**Reporting a Bill** – After a bill has been reviewed and approved in committee, the committee submits a report with recommendations and findings to the full chamber.

**Rider** – An amendment that is added to a piece of legislation with the assumption that it will pass more easily than if it was introduced as a stand-alone bill. Riders are usually unrelated to the bill’s subject.

**Secretary of the Senate** – The Senate’s chief administrative officer.

**Select or Special Committee** – A committee created for a specific purpose, usually for a limited amount of time. Either chamber of Congress can write a resolution to create such a committee.

**Speaker of the House** – The presiding officer of the House of Representatives.

**Special Session** – A session that is called by the President after Congress has ended its session (adjournment Sine Die).

**Suspension of Rules** – A special procedure that allows either chamber of Congress to work more quickly. When there is a “suspension of rules” in the House, debate on legislation is limited to 40 minutes, no amendments are allowed, and in order to be passed, it must garner a two-thirds vote.

**Tri-Caucus** – The Congressional Tri-Caucus includes the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus. Together, these groups create a powerful bloc in the House of Representatives that is committed to promoting and securing equal rights for all Americans. The Tri-Caucus is also committed to health reform that strengthens all communities and significantly reduces the health disparities that disproportionately affect people of color across the United States and in the U.S. Territories.

**U-Z** **Unanimous Consent** – Allows the passage of bills without debate when all members on the floor are in agreement.

**Veto** – The power of the President to reject a bill.

**Voice Vote** – The voting system where all those in favor vote yes, followed by all those against who vote no, and the presiding officer determines which side has more votes. No record is kept of individual votes.

**Ways and Means Committee** – One of three committees with jurisdiction over health policy in the House of Representatives. The health policy issues that the committee is primarily concerned with include Medicare parts A and B and health proposals that are funded through general federal revenues. The committee is also charged with raising the revenue that is required to finance the operation of the federal government,

including taxes. The committee has six subcommittees, including a Subcommittee on Health.

**Yield** – The term for allowing another member to speak. If an individual yields to another member, he or she retains the right to the floor, but the time used to make the other member's statements is taken from the original member's time allotment. When yielding to the floor, the member indicates that he or she has finished speaking.

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### For more information:

“Glossary of Congressional and Legislative Terms,” TheCapitol.Net, available online at <http://www.thecapitol.net/glossary/>.

“Virtual Reference Desk,” U.S. Senate, available online at [http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/reference/b\\_three\\_sections\\_with\\_teasers/virtual.htm](http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/reference/b_three_sections_with_teasers/virtual.htm).