

Congress by the Numbers

Together, the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S Senate are called Congress, the legislative branch of the federal government. Congress has many powers including writing the nation’s laws, approving treaties, and declaring war.

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The Constitution is the foundation upon which the United States was built. Article I, Sections 2 and 3 of the Constitution discuss the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, the two parts or bodies of Congress. There are two members of the Senate per state; therefore there are (1) _____ members of the U.S. Senate. The House of Representatives is much larger, having today 335 more voting members than the Senate. The total number of voting members in the House of Representatives is (2) _____. Draw a pie chart that illustrates the number of members of the House and Senate as portions of the entire Congress. There are more than (3) _____ times as many members of the House as the Senate.

The House and Senate generally operate by majority rule. A majority vote means that one more than half the members voted “yes” or “no.” In the Senate, a majority vote requires (4) _____ votes. In the House of Representatives, a majority vote requires (5) _____ members to agree.

According to the Constitution, there are times when more than a majority vote is needed in Congress. Article I, Section 7 outlines what happens if the President vetoes (refuses to sign) a bill. The Senate and House of Representatives can override a veto if two-thirds of both memberships votes to do so. In the Senate, (6) _____ members must vote “yea” to override a veto. The House of Representatives requires (7) _____ members to override a veto.

In Article V, the founders wrote that a change to the Constitution, called an amendment, must be supported by two-thirds of the members of the House of Representatives and of the Senate. Following that action by Congress, three-fourths of the state legislatures must ratify (agree) to the amendment for it to become law. In 1796, Tennessee became the 16th state of the union, thereby raising the requirement to (8) _____ states for agreeing to a proposed amendment to the Constitution. By 1845, when Texas joined the union, we were a nation of 28 states; therefore (9) _____ states had to ratify a change to the Constitution. Today we are a nation of many states, resulting in a need for (10) _____ states to agree to a change in the Constitution.

The nation’s founders believed that amending the Constitution was such a momentous event that significant agreement was necessary. To date, the Constitution has been amended only (11) _____ times.

Occasionally, there are votes in the Senate that require a vote by members to put a limit on debate on a bill. This vote is called “cloture,” and according to the rules of the Senate it requires a three-fifths favorable vote to use the “cloture” procedure. Assuming every state has the required two members present, (12) _____ members must vote ‘yes’ to limit debate and proceed.

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- 1 How would the number comprising a majority in the House or Senate differ in 1796 and 1845? (Hint: There were 106 members of the House in 1796 and 232 members in 1845.)
- 2 Develop a graph about a legislative topic of interest to you using the “Statistics & Lists” page of the U.S. Senate Website:
http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/reference/two_column_table/Legislation_and_Procedure.htm
- 3 Students discuss the following question: Why did the founders require more than a majority vote to override the President’s veto of a bill and to amend the Constitution? Students consider arguments for and against these requirements found in the Constitution. Following the discussion, students summarize their findings.

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| 1 | 100 | 5 | 218 | 9 | 21 |
| 2 | 435 | 6 | 66 | 10 | 38 |
| 3 | 4 | 7 | 290 | 11 | 27 |
| 4 | 51 | 8 | 12 | 12 | 60 |

RESOURCES:

<http://www.senate.gov/reference/Index/Constitution.htm>
http://www.senate.gov/reference/glossary_term/vote.htm
<http://kids.clerk.house.gov/middle-school/lesson.html?intID=1>
<http://kids.clerk.house.gov/middle-school/glossary.html>
http://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm
http://www.senate.gov/reference/glossary_term/cloture.htm