

The U.S. Congress

The primary duty of Congress is to write, debate, and pass bills, which are then passed on to the president for approval.

The Constitution grants Congress “all legislative powers” in the national government. Article I, Section 8, of the Constitution lists a wide range of congressional powers, including:

- Coining money.
- Maintaining a military.
- Declaring war on other countries.
- Regulating interstate and foreign commerce.

Congress also controls federal taxing and spending policies—one of the most important sources of power in the government. The Constitution also gives Congress the authority to “make all laws which shall be necessary and proper,” an implied source of power sometimes called the Elastic Clause.

One of the most important implied powers is Congress’s authority to investigate and oversee the executive branch and its agencies, such as the Department of Defense and the Department of Justice. Congress also holds hearings on matters of general public concern. Sometimes members of Congress conduct these hearings to identify problems that create a need for new laws. In other cases Congress holds hearings to raise public awareness about an issue.

There are, however, some congressional powers that are rarely used such as the ability to impeach an official and amending the Constitution.

In addition to the power described above, Congress shares powers with the president in matters such as, framing U.S. foreign policy and control over the military. For example, while the president negotiates treaties, they are only put into effect once the Senate approves them. Also, while Congress can declare war and approve funds for the military, the president is the commander-in-chief of the military.

A new Congress begins in January every two years following congressional elections, in which voters choose all representatives and a third of the senators. The entire House membership faces re-election every two years, but the Senate is a continuing body because there is never an entirely new Senate. Since the First Congress, which met from 1789 to 1791, all Congresses have been numbered in order. We are currently in the 115th Congress. Congress meets once every year. Usually the session lasts from January 3rd to July 31st, but it can last much longer.”

For the most part, the House and Senate each meet in their respective chamber in the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. However, on rare occasions, they will meet together for a joint session of Congress in the House chamber. For example, a joint session will be called to count electoral votes for presidential elections.