



## Glossary of Federal Legislative Terms

**act** - Legislation (a bill or joint resolution, see below) which has passed both chambers of Congress in identical form, been signed into law by the president, or passed over his veto, thus becoming law. Technically, this term also refers to a bill that has been passed by one house and engrossed.

**adjourn** - A motion to adjourn in the Senate (or a committee) ends that day's session.

**amendment** - A proposal to alter the text of a pending bill or other measure by striking out some of it, by inserting new language, or both. Before an amendment becomes part of the measure, the Senate must agree to it.

**appropriation** - The provision of funds, through an annual appropriations act or a permanent law, for federal agencies to make payments out of the Treasury for specified purposes. The formal federal spending process consists of two sequential steps: authorization and then appropriation. Legislation status tables and information about the appropriations process are available on the Appropriations page.

**authorization** - A statutory provision that obligates funding for a program or agency. An authorization may be effective for one year, a fixed number of years, or an indefinite period. An authorization may be for a definite amount of money or for "such sums as may be necessary." The formal federal spending process consists of two sequential steps: authorization and then appropriation.

**authorizations act** - A law that establishes or continues one or more Federal agencies or programs, establishes the terms and conditions under which they operate, authorizes the enactment of appropriations, and specifies how appropriated funds are to be used. Authorizations acts sometimes provide permanent appropriations.

**bill** - The principal vehicle employed by lawmakers for introducing their proposals (enacting or repealing laws, for example). They address either matters of general interest ("public bills") or narrow interest ("private bills"), such as immigration cases and individual claims against the Federal government.

**caucus** - From the Algonquian Indian language, a caucus meant "to meet together." An informal organization of members of the House or the Senate, or both, that exists to discuss issues of mutual concern and possibly to perform legislative research and policy planning for its members. There are regional, political or ideological, ethnic, and economic-based caucuses.

**Chairman** - The presiding officer of a committee or subcommittee, who is a member of the majority party.

**committee** - A subdivision of the Senate or House that considers legislation, conducts hearings and investigations, or carries out other assignments as instructed by the chamber. Most Committees are

divided into specialized subcommittees. For example, the House Appropriations Committee has a Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education.

**committee jurisdiction** - The subjects and functions assigned to a committee by rule, resolution, precedent, or practice, including legislative matters, oversight and investigations, and nominations of executive officers.

**companion bill or measure** - Similar or identical legislation which is introduced in the Senate and House. House and Senate lawmakers who share similar views on legislation may introduce a companion bill in their respective chambers to promote simultaneous consideration of the measure.

**conferees** - Members appointed to serve on a joint House-Senate conference committee. They are also called "managers." Conferees are usually appointed from the committee or committees that reported the legislation being considered; they are expected to try and uphold their chamber's position on measures when they negotiate with conferees from the other body.

**conference committee** - A temporary, ad hoc panel composed of House and Senate conferees which is formed for the purpose of reconciling differences in legislation that has passed both chambers. Conference committees are usually convened to resolve bicameral differences on major and controversial legislation.

**conference report** - The compromise bill negotiated by the conference committee. The conference report must be approved by the House and Senate in order to be forwarded to the President for his signature to become law.

**Congressional Record** - A verbatim account of daily proceedings on the House and Senate floor. It is printed daily when the House or Senate is in session.

**continuing resolution/continuing appropriations** - Legislation in the form of a joint resolution enacted by Congress, when the new fiscal year is about to begin or has begun, to provide budget authority for Federal agencies and programs to continue in operation until the regular appropriations acts are enacted.

**Cosponsor** - A senator or representative who adds his or her name as a supporter to the sponsor's bill.

**entitlement** - A Federal program or provision of law that requires payments to any person or unit of government that meets the eligibility criteria established by law. Entitlements constitute a binding obligation on the part of the Federal Government, and eligible recipients have legal recourse if the obligation is not fulfilled. Social Security and veterans' compensation and pensions are examples of entitlement programs.

**fiscal year** - The fiscal year is the accounting period for the federal government which begins on October 1 and ends on September 30. The fiscal year is designated by the calendar year in which it ends; for example, fiscal year 2013 begins on October 1, 2012 and ends on September 30, 2013. Congress passes appropriations legislation to fund the government for every fiscal year.

**floor** - Action "on the floor" is that which occurs as part of a formal session in the House or Senate. An action "from the floor" is one taken by a Senator or Representative during a session of the Senate. A congressman who has been recognized to speak by the chair is said to "have the floor."

**floor leaders** - The majority leader and minority leader are elected by their respective party conferences to serve as the chief spokesmen for their parties and to manage and schedule the legislative and executive business of the House and Senate. By custom, the presiding officer gives the floor leaders priority in obtaining recognition to speak on the floor of the Senate.

**germane** - On the subject of the pending bill or other business; a strict standard of relevance.

**hearing** - A meeting of a committee or subcommittee -- generally open to the public -- to take testimony in order to gather information and opinions on proposed legislation, to conduct an investigation, or review the operation or other aspects of a Federal agency or program.

**hold** - An informal practice by which a senator or representative informs his or her floor leader that he or she does not wish a particular bill or other measure to reach the floor for consideration. The majority leader need not follow the wishes, but is on notice that the opposing senator may filibuster any motion to proceed to consider the measure.

**"lame duck" session** - When Congress (or either chamber) reconvenes in an even-numbered year following the November general elections to consider various items of business. Some lawmakers who return for this session will not be in the next Congress. Hence, they are informally called "lame duck" members participating in a "lame duck" session.

**legislative session** - That part of the Senate or House daily session in which it considers legislative business (bills, resolutions, and actions related thereto).

**markup** - The process by which congressional committees and subcommittees debate, amend, and rewrite proposed legislation.

**outlays** - Outlays are payments made (generally through the issuance of checks or disbursement of cash) to liquidate obligations. Outlays during a fiscal year may be for payment of obligations incurred in prior years or in the same year.

**public law** - A public bill or joint resolution that has passed both chambers and been enacted into law. Public laws have general applicability nationwide.

**ranking minority member** - The highest ranking (and usually longest serving) minority member of a committee or subcommittee. Senators may not serve as ranking minority member on more than one standing committee.

**recess** - A temporary interruption of the House or Senate's proceedings, sometimes within the same day. They may also recess overnight rather than adjourn at the end of the day. Recess also refers to longer breaks, such as the breaks taken during holiday periods, pursuant to concurrent resolution.

**roll call vote** - A vote in which each legislator votes "yea" or "nay" as his or her name is called by the clerk, so that the names of congressmen voting on each side are recorded. Under the Constitution, a roll call vote must be held if demanded by one-fifth.

**scorekeeping** - Procedures for tracking and reporting on the status of congressional budgetary actions, including up-to-date tabulations and reports on congressional actions affecting budget authority, receipts, outlays, the surplus or deficit, and the public debt limit.

**Sequestration** – An automatic across-the-board budget cut.

**seniority** - The status given congressmen according to their length of service, which entitles a senator with greater seniority to preferential treatment in matters such as committee assignments.

**subcommittee** - Subunit of a committee established for the purpose of dividing the committee's workload. Recommendations of a subcommittee must be approved by the full committee before being reported to the House or Senate.

**trust funds** - Funds collected and used by the Federal Government for carrying out specific purposes and programs according to terms of a trust agreement or statute, such as the Social Security trust funds.

**president of the Senate** - Vice President.

**unanimous consent** - A senator or representative may request unanimous consent on the floor to set aside a specified rule of procedure so as to expedite proceedings. If no one objects, the House or Senate permits the action, but if any one objects, the request is rejected. Unanimous consent requests with only immediate effects are routinely granted, but ones affecting the floor schedule, the conditions of considering a bill or other business, or the rights of other legislators, are normally not offered, or a floor leader will object to it, until all representatives senators concerned have had an opportunity to inform the leaders that they find it acceptable.

**user fees** - Fees charged to users of goods or services provided by the Federal Government. In levying or authorizing these fees, Congress determines whether the revenue should go into the Treasury or should be available to the agency providing the goods or services.

**veto** - The procedure established under the Constitution by which the president refuses to approve a bill or joint resolution and thus prevents its enactment into law. A regular veto occurs when the president returns the legislation to the house in which it originated. The president usually returns a vetoed bill with a message indicating his reasons for rejecting the measure. The veto can be overridden only by a two-thirds vote in both the Senate and the House.

**voice vote** - A vote in which the presiding officer states the question, then asks those in favor and against to say "Yea" or "Nay," respectively, and announces the result according to his or her judgment. The names or numbers of senators voting on each side are not recorded.

**vote** - Unless rules specify otherwise, the Senate or House may agree to any question by a majority voting, if a quorum is present. The Chair puts each question by voice vote unless the "yeas and nays" are requested, in which case a roll call vote occurs.

**whips** - Assistants to the floor leaders who are also elected by their party conferences. The majority and minority whips (and their assistants) are responsible for mobilizing votes within their parties on major issues. In the absence of a party floor leader, the whip often serves as acting floor leader.