

Who Can Serve in the U.S. Congress?

Constitution sets requirements, conditions for service

The Constitution requires that U.S. senators must be at least 30 years of age, citizens of the United States for at least nine years and residents of the states from which they are elected. Members of the House of Representatives must be at least 25, citizens for seven years and residents of the states from which they are elected.

States may set additional requirements for election to Congress, but the Constitution gives each house the power to determine the qualifications of its members. Each state is entitled to two senators. Thus, Rhode Island, the smallest state, with an area of about 3,156 square kilometers, has the same senatorial representation as Alaska, the biggest state, with an area of some 1,524,640 square kilometers. Wyoming, with an estimated 480,000 persons, has representation equal to that of California, with its population of 32,270,000.

The total number of members of the House of Representatives has been determined by Congress. That number is divided among the states according to their populations. Regardless of its population, every state constitutionally is guaranteed at least one member of the House. Currently, seven states -- Alaska, Delaware, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming -- have only one representative. On the other hand, six states have more than 20 representatives -- California alone has 52.

The Constitution provides for a national census every 10 years and a redistribution of House seats according to population shifts. Under the original constitutional provision, the number of representatives was to be no more than one for each 30,000 citizens. There were 65 members in the first House, and the number was increased to 106 after the first census. Had the 1-to-30,000 formula been adhered to permanently, population growth in the United States would have brought the total number of representatives to about 7,000. Instead, the formula has been adjusted over the years, and today the ratio of representatives to people is about 1-to-600,000.

State legislatures divide the states into congressional districts, which must be substantially equal in population. Every two years, the voters of each district choose a representative for Congress.

Senators are chosen in statewide elections held in even-numbered years. The senatorial term is six years, and every two years one-third of the Senate stands for election. Hence, two-thirds of the senators are always persons with some legislative experience at the national level.

It is theoretically possible for the House to be composed entirely of legislative novices. In practice, however, most members are re-elected several times, and the House, like the Senate, always can count on a core group of experienced legislators.

Because members of the House serve two-year terms, the life of a Congress is considered to be two years, with each of those years representing a session of that Congress. The 20th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provides that the Congress will convene in regular session each January 3, unless Congress fixes a different date.

The Congress remains in session until its members vote to adjourn -- usually late in the year. During a given session, Congress may recess several times, for periods ranging from a few days to several weeks.

The president may call a special session when he thinks it necessary. Sessions are held in the Capitol building in Washington.