



Glossary of Congressional Terms

January 2009

A-C

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 entirely 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."

Budget Authority: The ability under the law to obligate federal funds, which will then 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 is passed, 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, etc.

Chamber of Congress: The Congress is divided into 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 “committee” is ended, and 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 is created in order to resolve differences between versions of a bill that have been passed by the Senate and House.

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 a final appropriation for the program is passed.

Energy and Commerce Committee: A committee in the House that has jurisdiction over Medicaid and some parts of Medicare.
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: A committee in the Senate that has jurisdiction over Medicaid and Medicare.

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: A committee in the Senate that has jurisdiction over all health-related programs except Medicaid and Medicare.

Hearing: Sessions held by House and Senate committees where testimony by various interested parties is presented. 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 it is passed in identical forms in both chambers of Congress and signed by the President.

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 is also controlled by the majority.

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 possibly “marks up” the bill by adding amendments.

Minority Leader: The minority party in the House or the Senate chooses a spokesperson that also leads the legislative strategies for the party.

D-M

Minority Whip: The assistant to the minority leader.

N-Z 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.

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 in the hopes of passing it more easily than if it were 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. Such a committee is created by a resolution by either chamber of Congress.

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.

Unanimous Consent: Allows the passage of bills without debate when all members on the floor are in agreement.

Veto: When the President rejects a bill.

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

Ways and Means Committee: A committee in the House that has jurisdiction over all health care programs, including most of Medicare, but not Medicaid.

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.

For more information, see:

“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.