



## It All Comes Down to a Vote

You already know the legislative branch of the U.S. government is the branch that makes laws. You've seen the diagrams showing that Congress has two parts—the Senate and the House of Representatives. You've learned about bills and the long process they have to go through before they become laws. Both the Senate and the House have to vote to pass a bill, and then the bill gets sent to the President for a signature... But wait. Back up. It's easy to pass over the word "vote" in the larger process of how bills become laws. It's a very small word, and we all know what it means. But voting in Congress is about a lot more than just saying "yea" or "nay."

Each member of Congress has a power that nobody in the other branches of government has: the power to vote on proposed laws. Each member must make a decision about each bill, and it's a lot of work. So how do members of Congress decide whether to vote yes or no on a bill? It isn't a matter of flipping a coin, that's for sure! Members of Congress face pressure from all kinds of people and groups who have a stake in any particular bill, so there are a lot of factors to consider. Let's look at four big questions members of Congress think about when they're making this decision.

### Can We Do That?

The U.S. Constitution lists all the powers that Congress has. Congress is limited by what the Constitution says, and it cannot do anything that isn't on the list. So the first factor members of Congress consider is whether they have the power to pass a particular law. Here's a summary of the powers Congress has:

- Make laws about immigration
- Make laws about bankruptcy
- Establish post offices
- Declare war
- Raise and support armies
- Collect taxes to raise money to pay debts, defend the country, and provide for the general welfare of the U.S.
- Pass laws about business that happens in more than one state, with foreign countries, and with Indian tribes



And that's not all. On top of this, Congress has the power to make all laws that are "necessary and proper" for executing the powers on the list. This means Congress can do things that are not specifically on the list as long as they are related to something that *is* on the list.



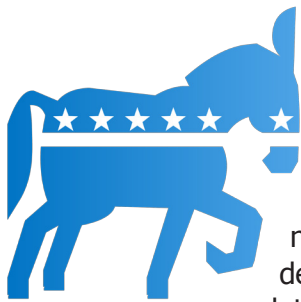
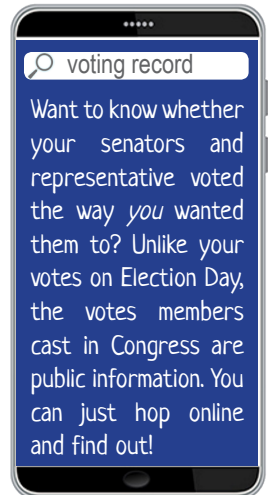
### What Do My Constituents Want?

People don't just wake up one day and decide to go be a member of Congress. The only way to serve in Congress is to be elected by voters. If you're a Senator, then a majority of voters in your state voted for you. If you're a Representative, then you were elected by a majority of voters in a district within your state. Either way, members have one job when they get to Congress: Represent the people who sent them there. This doesn't mean just the people who showed up at the polls on Election Day. It means everyone who lives in their state or district! The people who are being represented are called **constituents** (con-STIH-chew-ents).

## What DO My Constituents Want??

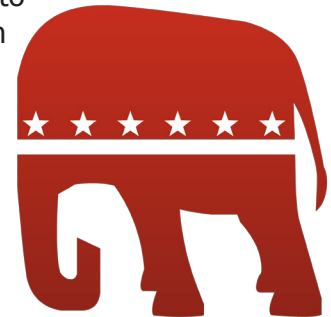
So how do members of Congress figure out what their constituents want them to do? First, everyone expects their elected representatives to work in the people's best interest. This means working to pass laws that will help the people in the state or district, such as by creating jobs or protecting resources that are found there.

Members of Congress also pay attention to the kind of people they are representing. Are there large populations of elderly people there, or a particular ethnic group, or a lot of people who are wealthy or poor or in-between? Members will work to pass laws that are favored by large groups of their constituents. On some hot-button issues, members get lots of calls, letters, and emails from constituents either supporting or opposing a bill. Members of Congress pay attention to these communications. Most members of Congress hope to get re-elected, so they want to please as many constituents as possible.



## What Position Does My Political Party Take?

Like it or not, American politics is driven by political parties. Each political party has a platform, which is a written document describing where the party stands on almost every issue facing America. Each member of Congress belongs to a political party (except for Independents, who belong to no party). While members are free to make their own decisions about voting for or against any bill, there is a lot of pressure within the political parties for members to vote a certain way. When members vote against their party leaders' wishes, it's usually because they have a lot of constituents who disagree with the party on that issue. In a showdown between party and constituents, the constituents are likely to win. Why? Because those are the people with the power to re-elect members of Congress or throw them out!



## What Do I Think?

I think I'll vote yea.  
No—nay. But maybe yea.  
Unless I vote nay...



There's no point at which someone stops being a person and starts being a member of Congress. People who are elected to serve in Congress are human just like the rest of us, and they share something all humans have in common: opinions. Everyone has them, right? Usually, people elected to Congress share the views of most of the voters. That's why they got elected. And often, a member's views will be similar to his or her political party anyway, which is probably the party that most of the voters belong to. Members of Congress aren't supposed to just vote according to their personal views and ignore everything else. But members' personal opinions are always a factor when deciding whether to vote yes or no.

## Putting It All Together

When it comes time to vote, a member of Congress will consider all of the above factors—and probably more. They also consider what they've learned from groups and business industries that have lobbied the member to take a particular view about an issue. All that's left is to make a decision and cast a vote!

Many national groups represent people and businesses interested in specific issues. The threat of negative publicity from these groups at election time is very real. This can influence how a member of Congress decides to vote.

## Informal Assessment

**Directions:** Tell the class you will ask a series of questions and that they are to answer as a chorus. Tell them to wait to answer until you ask for the answer. Ask each question twice, give wait time, then ask for the answer. Ask the class to explain why “false” or wrong answer choices are incorrect.

1. Congress can pass any law it wants to. *(F)*
2. Congress has the power to create armies. *(T)*
3. Congress cannot control business that happens in more than one state. *(F)*
4. Congress may collect taxes for certain reasons. *(T)*
5. Congress cannot make any laws about immigration. *(F)*
6. Congress can make any law as long as it is “necessary and proper.” *(F)*
7. When can Congress do something that is not listed in the Constitution?
  - A. Always
  - B. Never
  - C. When it relates to something that is listed.**
8. Members of Congress vote based only on their personal opinions. *(F)*
9. Members of Congress always agree with their political party about bills. *(F)*
10. When considering a bill, members of Congress should think about:
  - A. Only themselves
  - B. Voters back home**
  - C. People on the moon
11. If people in Congress do a bad job, voters back home can kick them out. *(T)*
12. In Congress, being on a political party is like being on a \_\_\_\_\_. *(team)*
13. People in political parties share similar:
  - A. Constituents
  - B. Opinions about movies
  - C. Values**
14. When voting on a bill, members of Congress usually think about four things. What are those four things? *(The powers of Congress, what constituents think, political party’s position, and personal opinion)*

# Voting in Congress

Name: \_\_\_\_\_


**A. Choose Your Role.** Are you a Senator or a Representative? Choose one and put your information on your new business card:



SENATOR \_\_\_\_\_  
(Your Name)

Representing the State of \_\_\_\_\_


Office of Senator \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

REPRESENTATIVE \_\_\_\_\_  
(Your Name)

Representing the City of \_\_\_\_\_  
State of \_\_\_\_\_

Office of Rep. \_\_\_\_\_  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515



**B. Choose Your Value.** Chose *one* value you think matters most and circle it:



**Liberty** means keeping government rules and regulations to a minimum.



**Equality** means that everyone is treated fairly and has an equal chance.



**Competition** means encouraging people to compete in order to succeed.



**Cooperation** means encouraging people to work together to get things done.



**Cost Saving** means that the government tries to avoid spending a lot of money.



**Generosity** means the government provides many benefits or services to citizens.

➔ These tend to be **Republican Party** values.

➔ These tend to be **Democratic Party** values.

## Bill "A": No Mail on Saturdays

### Factor #1

Does Congress have the power to do this?

Yes       No

Because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Factor #2

Would your constituents support this bill?

Yes       No

Because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Factor #3

Would your political party likely support this bill?

1) Check one value this bill stands for the most:

- Liberty                       Equality  
 Competition                 Cooperation  
 Cost Saving                    Generosity

2) This bill would most likely be supported by the:

Republican Party     Democratic party

### Factor #4

In your opinion, should this bill pass?

Yes       No

Because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_




Based on all four factors, how will you vote?

Yea                       Nay


# Voting in Congress

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Bill "B": Raise the Minimum Wage

<p><b>Factor #1</b></p> <p>Does Congress have the power to do this?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes      <input type="radio"/> No</p> <p>Because _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p><b>Factor #2</b></p> <p>Would your constituents support this bill?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes      <input type="radio"/> No</p> <p>Because _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>Factor #3</b></p> <p>Would your political party likely support this bill?</p> <p>1) Check one value this bill stands for the most:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Liberty      <input type="radio"/> Equality</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Competition      <input type="radio"/> Cooperation</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Cost Saving      <input type="radio"/> Generosity</p> <p>2) This bill would most likely be supported by the:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Republican Party      <input type="radio"/> Democratic party</p>	<p><b>Factor #4</b></p> <p>In your opinion, should this bill pass?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes      <input type="radio"/> No</p> <p>Because _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p> Based on all four factors, how will you vote?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yea      <input type="radio"/> Nay</p>	

## Bill "C": Grant Titles of Nobility

<p><b>Factor #1</b></p> <p>Does Congress have the power to do this?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes      <input type="radio"/> No</p> <p>Because _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p><b>Factor #2</b></p> <p>Would your constituents support this bill?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes      <input type="radio"/> No</p> <p>Because _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>Factor #3</b></p> <p>Would your political party likely support this bill?</p> <p>1) Check one value this bill stands for the most:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Liberty      <input type="radio"/> Equality</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Competition      <input type="radio"/> Cooperation</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Cost Saving      <input type="radio"/> Generosity</p> <p>2) This bill would most likely be supported by the:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Republican Party      <input type="radio"/> Democratic party</p>	<p><b>Factor #4</b></p> <p>In your opinion, should this bill pass?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes      <input type="radio"/> No</p> <p>Because _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p> Based on all four factors, how will you vote?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yea      <input type="radio"/> Nay</p>	