Structure of the Senate

Composition of the Senate

Congress is made up of two legislative houses—the House of Representatives and the Senate. One hundred senators, two from each state, serve and represent their constituencies in the Senate. The Senate differs from the House of Representatives in several ways. First, the Senate has less than one-fourth the number of seats as the House, which has 435 members. Senators represent a larger base of constituents than House members do; two senators represent their entire state as representatives at-large, whereas House members represent a single district within their state. Senators must be at least 30 years of age, they must be a resident of the state they represent, and they must have been a citizen of the United States for at least nine years. In an effort to maintain continuity in the Senate, only one-third of the senators stand for re-election at one time. With the high rate of incumbent retention, the Senate membership tends to change much slower than the membership of the House of Representatives.

An interesting relationship exists between the two houses of the legislature. In the early years of the new government under the Constitution, the Senate perceived itself as superior to the House of Representatives. The British system of an upper house (House of Lords) and a lower house (House of Commons) served to reinforce this perception. In fact, the Senate even snubbed President Washington when he attempted to use them as an advisory board. When Washington approached the Senate to advise him on a recently negotiated Indian treaty, the Senate deferred the issue to a committee, despite Washington’s hope that they could discuss the issue immediately.

The House of Representatives, which considers itself a workhorse, has often viewed the Senate as snobbish and inefficient. The House was designed to directly represent the will of the people and was therefore chosen by popular election. Conversely, senators, who were chosen by state legislatures, were expected to represent the will and interests of those in power in a given state. Since the system for electing senators eventually became corrupt, the Seventeenth Amendment was added to the Constitution in 1913, stating that senators shall be elected by the people through popular election.

The characteristics shared by members of Congress tend to be more uniform than the constituents they represent. Like House members, senators tend to be male, white, wealthy, and have a law or business career background. Since the characteristics of members of Congress do not match the demographics of the American people, congressional representation is described as substantive rather than descriptive representation. Instead of sharing the interests of their constituency because of common background, culture, or concerns, congressmen stand for their constituents by
representing their interests. A good example would be Senator Ted Kennedy from Massachusetts. Senator Kennedy is white, wealthy, well educated, and clearly a member of the “Eastern Elite.” However, his long-term record in the Senate is one of representing the poor, undereducated, and unemployed.

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